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COVER: Boris Vallejo's "White Witch" cautions us to be wary of all Witches, no matter the color. ABOVE: Alan Pollack's painting for Patrick Weekes's "Dragons and Other Extinctions" shows the obvious dangers of hunting. For a closer look, turn to page 34.

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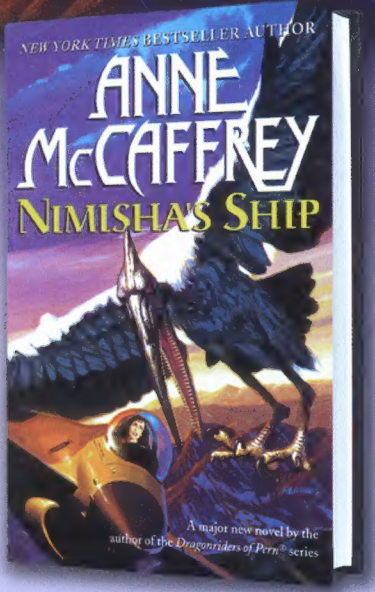

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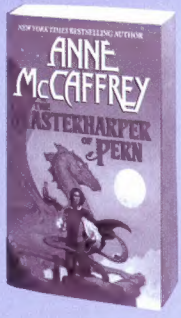

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Hate Mail and Love Letters

SINCE THE MAIL IS THE FIRST THING you all turn to in this (or any other) magazine, you have no doubt noticed that we get our share of—what shall we call them?—letters from less-than-delighted readers. We don't mind, really. After all, you can't please all of the people all of the time, and it wouldn't be a horse race otherwise, and diversity is the cornerstone of our culture, and different strokes for different folks, and every other catch phrase or cliché you can think of that expresses the well-known fact that opinions are like, well, let's say, noses: Everyone's got one.

We try to be open-minded about the negative letters—and the positive ones, too, though those are much easier to be open-minded about. It's much simpler, of course, to open a letter telling me what wonderful taste I have than it is to open a letter telling me what an idiot I am and asking if I was drunk when I bought that stupid story. Still, I try to take them all with a grain of salt—after all, it's my name on the masthead as Editor, so in the end, I can only edit for myself.

Buying stories that I liked was one of the first and hardest lessons I had to learn as an editor. When I first took over the helm at *Isaac Asimov's*, I didn't buy anything for three months or so—I just didn't have the nerve. I'd find things I liked, but then say to myself, "Oh, maybe that one's too dark, or that one's too hard, or that one's too silly. Maybe the readers will hate this story, and maybe they'll love that one over there." I was second-guessing myself so much trying to figure out what the readers would want that I was paralyzed as an editor. Finally a friend told me that, in the end, I could only edit for myself, buying those stories that I liked and hoping that most of the readers would like them too.

Of course, when I took over *Asimov's*, the magazine went through a fairly drastic change in tone, so I wasn't suprised that some of the fans of the magazine's previous content would be disturbed and unhappy with its new approach. I got lots of unhappy mail, but eventually the tide turned and the magazine found its readership. That's not to say that I never got an angry letter after that point, but they dropped off enough for me to sleep at night without visions of masked assassins running through my head.

The difference here, folks, is that I've been editing this magazine from Day One. There haven't been any major overhauls or upsets and what you saw and got in Volume 1, Number 1, is pretty much what you see and get today. I try to present a balance of well-written stories in a variety of genres—it's somewhat harder to find well-written stories in some genres than in others, but overall, I think we do pretty well in hitting most of the fantasy high notes.

That's why I'm startled to find letters like the one that appeared last issue—someone taking me to task for publishing "literature." I don't mind, honestly, I don't, if someone writes in and just doesn't like a story—it's not his or her cup of tea, or he or she thinks it's silly, or doesn't make sense—we have one of those sorts of letters in this very issue. But when someone writes and says they don't like "literature"... well, I have to throw up my hands—and then my lunch. So you don't like literature—like *The Hobbit*, or *La Morte D'Arthur*, or *Mary Poppins*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia* or, oh, the heck with it. My point is that some of the finest, most lasting, most important works of "literature" in the past hundred years or so have been fantasy. The two words are not mutually exclusive. If you don't like a story, fine. There are probably one or two in the issue you do like. If not, and if you just don't like my editorial taste, fine. There's probably a magazine whose editor you like better. But don't say you don't like "literature." Honestly, it's not a dirty word—it's just a way of defining work by writers who try to write better than "just okay," and that's the kind of writing I like to read, write, and encourage. I'm more than delighted that so many of you *RoF* readers continue to agree.

—Shawna McCarthy

REALMS OF FANTASY

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 3

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Dear Ms. McCarthy,

I would like to begin by saying "thank you." *Realms of Fantasy* is a wonderful magazine for both readers and writers of fantasy. It has become a horn of plenty for those of us whose selection is often limited to a few small shelves at the local bookstore. *RoF's* pages are graced by many talented authors; one of my personal favorites being Tanith Lee. "I Bring You Forever" (June '98), the last work of hers I was able to read, left me simply awestruck.

This brings me to a question ... *RoF* is full of accomplished writers who have written successful novels and numerous short stories. Are the pages of *RoF* open to writers such as myself who have not landed that reputation-building book deal? I may not be able to compare with the outstanding talent of writers such as Tanith Lee and Robert Charles Wilson but perhaps I can add a little something to the cornucopia.

Sincerely,
Steven Moore
Fayetteville, Georgia

Steven, here are two notes from Christopher Rowe and Fiona Kelleghan, new writers that we have recently published in the pages of RoF.

Dear Shawna and Rebecca,

Thanks again for all your help in publishing my story "The Secret in the Chest." I am thrilled with the job you all did. The illustration by Steven Adler is wonderful, and I loved the blurb which presume you wrote at the beginning.... "But pay attention, there will be a test afterward. It's call your life..."

Fiona Kelleghan
Coral Gables, FL

Dear Shawna and Rebecca,

I thought I would drop you a note and let you know about a message Ellen Datlow sent over to me. She is giving "Kin to Crows" an Honorable Mention next year in the year's best anthology she does with Terri Windling. Since it's my first published story, I'm quite pleased, as you might imagine.

Peace,
Christopher Rowe
Lansing, MI

You might also like to note that many of the fabulous writers who grace our pages have not yet quit their day jobs and/or have "paid their dues" so to speak, with years of writing experience—inclusive of teaching, editing, novel-writing (both published and unpublished), contests, classes, and so forth. Don't think for a minute that any writer has not, at one point in their lives, been at a starting point.

To Author Serverna Park:

Let me begin by asking your forgiveness for typing this letter. I find that handwritten letters convey a message of praise in an honesty that the typed word simply cannot. Recently I had the opportunity to read your story, "Tiger, Tiger" (April '98). I was captivated. The style of the story is one I rarely see done so well. The imagery is beautiful. Your descriptive prose brings India to life in a way any writer would envy. I can only hope that more of your stories are on the way. I plan to purchase "Speaking Dreams" and "Hand of Prophecy" based upon my feelings toward "Tiger, Tiger."

Sincerely,
Dionys Murphy
Portland, Oregon

Dear Ms. McCarthy:

In your August issue, as always, Gahan Wilson's review column was one of my favorite features. Whatever he is doing ... reviews, columns, stories ... Wilson is always interesting. And since I am a long-time admirer of Ray Harryhausen, I also much enjoyed the "Movies" column this time around.

"Dr. Rumpole" was a very entertaining story. Not sure I laughed aloud while reading it, but certainly chuckled all the way through. And the ending—the phony prison in the "Stupendous" Bldg. was great. I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. Re: "Happy Ending" by James Van Pelt ... I recall a Zelazny story from way back when that also reversed time. Van Pelt uses a related, but different, device. He uses it tellingly; this was my favorite story in the issue.

Sincerely,
Kendall Evans
Lakewood, CA

Dear Shawna;

I just wanted to commend you on choosing "Going Vampire" by Leslie What for the December issue. Just when I thought nothing new could be added to the world of vampires. And the art! Gives me the shivers!

I also wanted to say that I really liked "Innamorata." There seemed to be a mysteriousness and depth that I didn't full understand the first time I read it. But what a read!

Mike Gentry
Alexandria, VA

Hello there,

Recent issues of *RoF* have rekindled my appetite for fantasy fiction. I particularly enjoyed the cultural richness and passion of Constance Ash's "Flower Kiss." I don't know how close she is to her sources, but she certainly imbued her material with fire and exotic beauty. Brilliant.

Best,
Mary Turzillo
Berea, OH

Dear *Rof*,

I enjoy your magazine quite a bit. I am currently incarcerated in the Pennsylvania Prison System. One of the few things I get to look forward to is each new issue delivered here. Your magazine is well written and always contains one or two excellent articles as well. I also enjoy your magazine for its reviews and information on new releases. Do you have any idea when the latest volume in Robert Jordan's "Wheel of Time" series will be available? I have all the volumes to date and I'm anxious for the next. Thanks for your time.

Bryan Freeman
Albion, PA

The Path of Dagger's, Book Eight of the "Wheel of Time," will be available October 20.

Okay, we've been through a batch of nice letters—I suppose I need to give, in all fairness, the "naysayers" their 15 minutes. So read on ...

Dear *Realms;*

Though you dismissed Richard Ramsden's criticism in your October issue, the man did raise a valid point. As a reader, I appreciate good literary quality. But a good story, in my opinion, has got to have a plot. Your stories in the October issue lacked plot, for the most part. In "I Met a Traveler..." and "The Inner Inner City" all the main characters did was whine. These are prime examples of what I call PSB. Poor Suffering Bastard Literary Fiction. They bore me. I, personally, would like to see a few more stories where someone does something intelligent to solve a problem, and where failure is not a foregone conclusion. You have published some fine stories in the past, I am looking forward to reading more in the future.

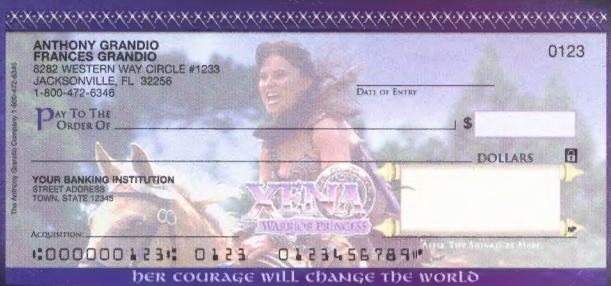
Sincerely yours,
Mark Harkins

Dear Mrs. McCarthy;

Regarding the story "Armageddon's Favorite Rose" (Oct. '98) I have a question

Continued on page 79

BATTLE ON...



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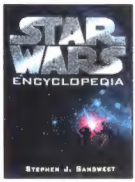

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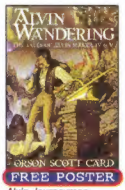

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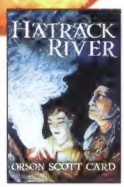

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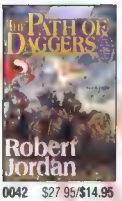

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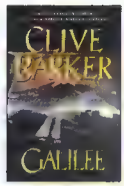

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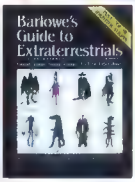

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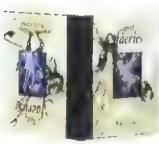

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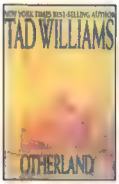

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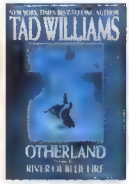

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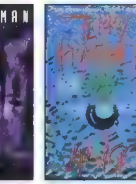

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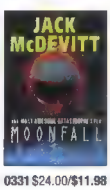

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BY GAHAN WILSON

Harlan Ellison, Ray Bradbury, and Ursula LeGuin pay homage to the late, great Avram Davidson.

BY AND LARGE I MUST CONFESS THAT THE PERIOD BETWEEN THIS REVIEW AND THE LAST ONE has, frankly, struck me as a very so-so stretch in the old fantasy genre. Mind you, it may actually have been a really terrifically productive period, one which will continue to inspire awe and wonder for scores of decades to come, but the simple truth is I've just been particularly busy, personally, in surviving from day to day and have had no time for browsing bookstores or picking up hints of undiscovered treasures on my own. The only stuff I've had a chance to scan has been those volumes which were mailed or FedExed or UPSed to me, and I regret to report that almost every one of them have been real eye glazers.

But—or I should say *BUT*—among the many door stopper-sized "*New York Times'* Best-Selling" 77th episode of the whoozie whatsis series there came unto me via our nation's postal service a great and truly wondrous collection: *The Avram Davidson Treasury* (edited by Robert Silverberg and Grania Davis; Tor Books NYC; 446 pages; hardcover, $27.95).

Unlike all those other books mentioned earlier with their raised metallic titles and restaurant mural illustrations depicting heroic doings taking place in gaudy lands of make believe (sometimes I think I can even smell the bad cooking) this glorious book announces itself in simple blue type set against a muted beige background. It's so plain it almost seems to defy the browser to try and find it among its glittering competition on the chain store fantasy shelves.

Indeed the composition is so excessively quiet and so determinedly unobtrusive and so aggressively unattention-grabbing as to be downright perverse. I find it easy to imagine that the whispy, rascally ghost of Avram Davidson would have enjoyed the cover's flamboyant violation of all modern rules of sales promotion very much; that his revenant might even have got itself involved in its design, whispering naughty suggestions that its extreme unobtrusiveness be upped (or should I say "downed"?) even further. "Why not do the lettering in pale gray instead of blue?" I can almost hear him saying. "Let's make 'em really *hunt* for the damned thing."

And it will be traditionally correct if this posthumous book of his does end up not selling very many copies as Davidson's stuff never really did do all that well with our nation's readers and this was not, as Robert Silverberg points out in his affectionate and informative Introduction, altogether the readers' fault.

In that Introduction Silverberg points out, among other telling things, that Davidson was in very many ways outstandingly inconsiderate of his public, and that he once pushed it to the extent of "abandoning a promising trilogy of novels one or two thirds of the way along." In the right mood I find this hilarious, but when it happened (and in other moods) I have to confess that I was not all that pleased to be so thoroughly hooked and then plopped back into the deep. Fortunately, among the many glorious gifts this book presents, *Treasury* is kind enough to give us the first chapter of the third volume of that trilogy and it's very, very good ... good enough to put me into another brand new funk about never being able to read the rest of the book, now that I have had a chance to brood about it.

Also, as with dear old Herman Melville, his work grew increasingly obscure and difficult for common readers (but not for you, don't worry!) and that, combined with a tendency not to suck up to people it is wise to suck up to, led to a steady shrinking of sales which, even at their peak, could probably never have been described as even "midlist," sad to say.

The *Treasury* is absolutely packed with loving and well-deserved tributes from a

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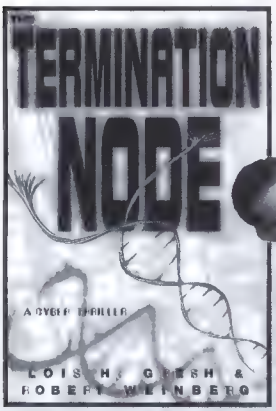

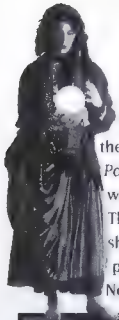

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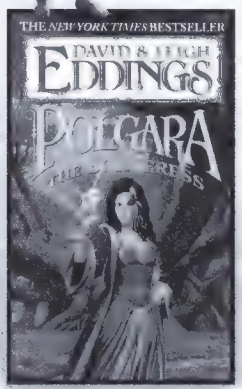

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wide variety of literary folk who have all leaped at the chance to express their heartfelt admiration for Avram Davidson's tremendous skill as a writer of short stories. The list is way too long to print here but I offer such as William Gibson, Kate Wilhelm, Ursula K. LeGuin, Peter S. Beagle, Thomas M. Disch, Algis Budrys, Harlan Ellison, and Ray Bradbury to give you a notion of its extraordinarily high quality.

And it's interesting how well they all do. It's clear the challenge has put them on their mettle and, among other things, their comments not only expand the book into a fascinating document on the complicated life and personality of Davidson but provide an absolute gold mine of wise and illuminating insights on the craft of writing and the business of writing.

I think it's fair to say that the book contains the cream of Davidson's short stories, which means it is an anthology no serious student of short fantasy can afford to miss. This is how to do it be you interested in horror, science fiction, Faerie, or diving into forms untried and altogether new. This is how it's done.

The collection starts with the start: "My Boyfriend's Name Is Jello." This gem appeared in the '50s in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and introduced Davidson to the world at large. It was a very impressive introduction, indeed, and I clearly remember the interior *Wow!* it gave me when I read it in those long-gone days now venerated by kindly innocents who truly believe that decade was as innocent as surviving television shows would have them believe (it was not).

"Boyfriend's" is followed by the "The Golem," another early *F & SF*/Anthony Boucher unveiling, and then the horses are off and we are able to browse through his brilliant career and read such excellent stuff as "Or All the Sea with Oysters," "The Sources of the Nile," "The House the Blakeneys Built," "Manatee Gal, Won't You Come Out Tonight," "The Slovo Stove," "The Price of a Charm," and "Where Do You Live, Queen Esther?" among many, many other absolutely fantastic (in every sense of the word) stories.

Don't miss a one of them.

Fool Avram's sly ghost and buy the book.

Genrewise—Isn't that a great horrible word? I just made it up and I can tell you I'm proud of it!—***Crypt Orchids***, by David J. Schow *(foreword by Robert Bloch; Subterranean Press, Burton MI; 235 pp.; hardcover, $35.00)*, is only partially fantasy, though with Schow you can read that statement, not to mention his stories, in a lot of different ways. He is tough on genres and on readers trying to figure which genre he's in at any particular time and with any particular story. He has a way of sliding from one to the other or, even more confusing, suddenly *transforming* one to the other. And then maybe back again.

To give a fairly obvious example: There's a story in here, "Gills," about the Creature from the Black Lagoon (called Manphibian for obvious legal reasons) and his agent working through a crucial point concerning his cinematic career with a studio producer. Now it would appear to be obvious that such a story has to be nothing but a bizarre fantasy and *yet* it is *also* a devastatingly dead accurate account of what would happen if the Creature from the Black Lagoon and his agent actually *were* working through a crucial point about his cinematic career with a studio producer. In absolutely every respect, in each tiny detail. Here is truth, dear readers, here is hard-won wisdom plucked by a pro from pits of painful experience I do not wish to contemplate (having far too many like pits of my very own), here is the way it really, truly is out there in sunny California.

Going on to a slightly more arcane confusion of genres, namely those of uplift and despair, "Refrigerator Heaven" lures us into working our way through a series of shifting points of view (and therefore from various kinds of realities and fantasies to other kinds of fantasies and realities) until we grasp the outlines of what seems to be a particularly grim sort of secret agent story. Skillfully the tale pulls us deeper and deeper into increasingly dark revelations until Schow suddenly yet gently gives the whole thing an absolutely magical twist and we discover that we have been reading a remarkably upbeat tale *until* … ah, but I don't want to give away the ending.

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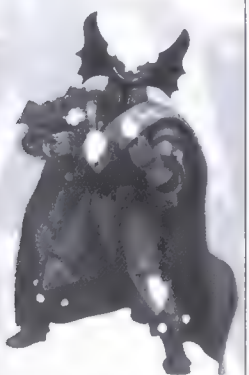

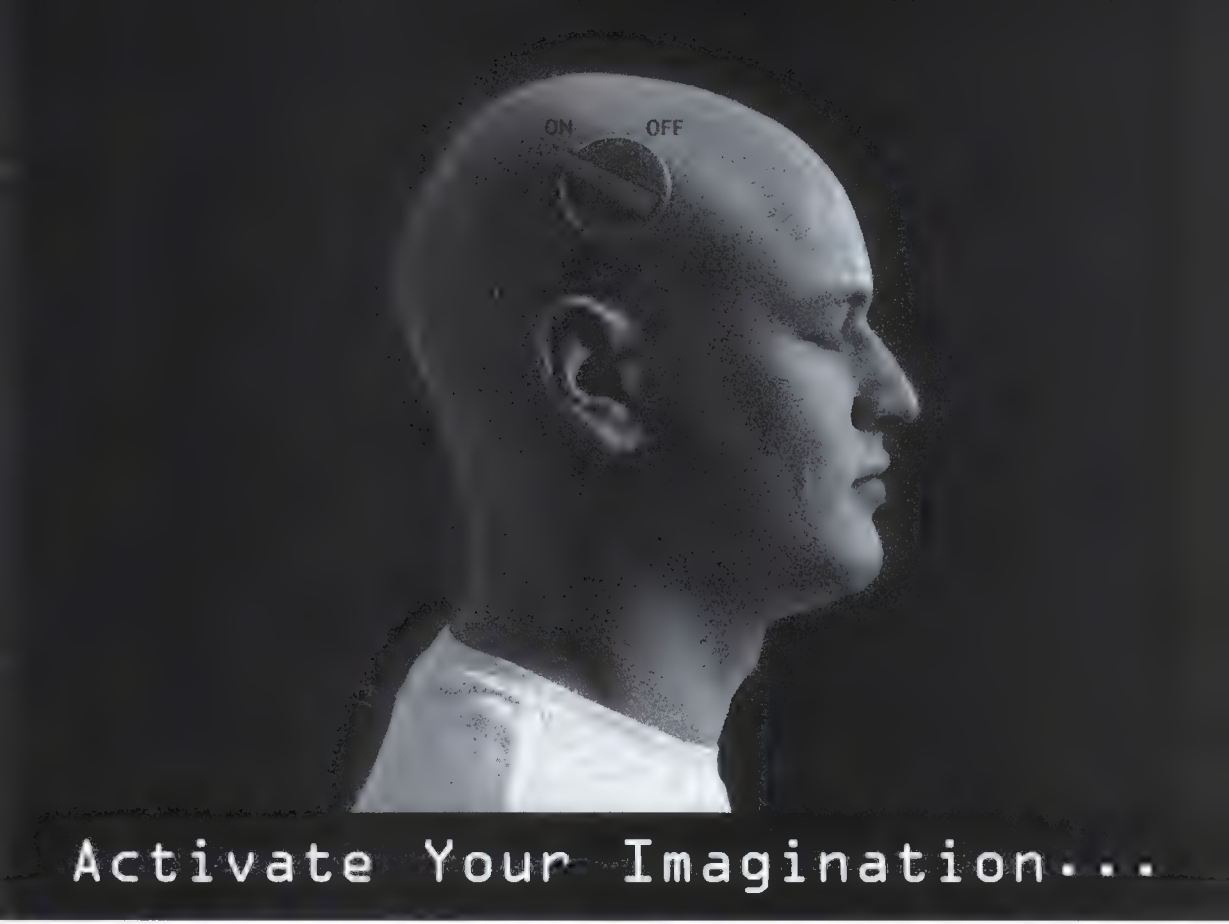

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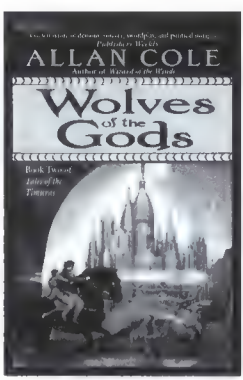

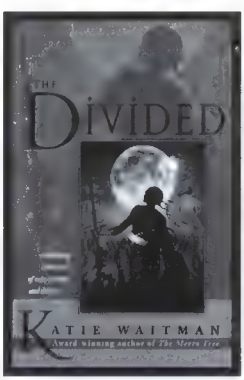

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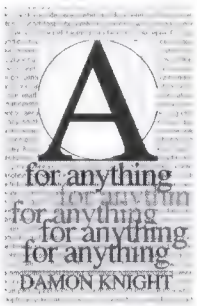

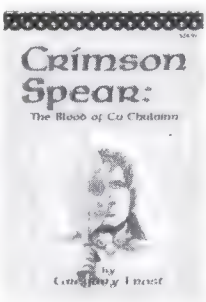

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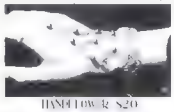

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tion of strangely shifting tales is the shifting nature of the whole anthology's format. The essential duplicity of the book's underlying structure is revealed in the Afterword which explains the heretofore shadowy significance of the Foreword which was written by Robert Bloch before that good, sweet man wandered off and left us to survive on our own. The review was actually written for a book that was eventually absorbed within *Crypt Orchids* with the passage of time and the writing of more stories, and the title of the present book is a product of literary osmosis from that introduction since this is the first time that Schow (and me, too, for that matter, and everybody else in the world as they read it, perhaps) first came across the phrase "crypt orchids."

I suggest you read the Afterword directly after you read the Foreword (which you should read first of all instead of skipping it like you usually do) (see how well I know you?) because that way you will be let in to the very funny joke about shifting which lurks under and throughout the book's putting together. Essentially it is a richly deserved attack on the now absolutely omnipresent rule that anthologies must have themes, but reading it will not only enrich many of the little jokes in *Crypt's* organization, it will increase your enjoyment of what that organization contains.

I think it only fair to warn you that this altogether excellent collection of work by one of the best writers currently writing most decidedly does contain offensive language, explicit sexual material, and—unlike the movies and TV shows usually bearing this admonition—adult themes. And they are all constantly shifting.

In contrast, ***In the Shadow of the Gargoyle*** *(edited by Nancy Kilpatrick and Thomas S. Roche; Ace Books NYC; 257 pp.; paperback, $12.00)* is a genuine theme anthology. Its editors took the format seriously, clearly chose the stories from their highly varied contributors carefully, and have assembled their package tastefully and with skill.

I confess to having been very fond of gargoyles from the moment I came to know of their existence as a child in the American Midwest from illustrations in books and films and some actual if modern ones leering down at me from city churches and office buildings and the interiors of richly decorated movie palaces.

The first really *old* gargoyles I came in close contact with (and oldness is so important when it comes to gargoyles!) were those of Notre Dame, no less, when I first came to Paris as a student.

I made it my business to climb up there and visit them the day after I got myself settled in a *pension*. It was a grand gargoyle day, overcast, a little misty, especially up there, close to the bells. I stood between two of the lovely, frightening things, pressed my palms on the banister and peered down at the City and the river running round either side

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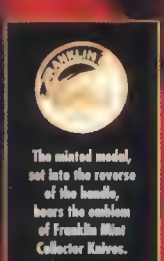

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of it and the fabulous tumble of buildings spreading beyond on either side.

There I was, a visiting young American Quasimodo, breathing deeply and gratefully of the cool, damp air.

And then my elbow brushed one of my new stone friends and something in its expression caused me to look carefully at my hands and on what they rested. Very gradually, possibly because it took time for the gargoyle's slow mineral mind to communicate the wonder of what it wanted me to know, it began to really dawn on me that this was not concrete under my fingers, not something poured puny decades ago, that this thing was a piece of stone whose present shape had been carved by the hammer and chisel of a medieval mason and hoisted into place by human muscle and the aid of hand-woven ropes and creaking pulleys centuries and centuries and centuries ago.

I have never recovered from that moment, thank God.

So I admit I came to *In the Shadow of the Gargoyle* in a good mood and favorably disposed. Happily I can say that I left it in much the same state of mind and spirit. It is not in any way groundbreaking but then it never pretends to be. The editors garnered some excellent material already printed by steady reliables such as Eillison, deLint, and Lumley (I somehow missed reading his *The Luststone* in *Weird Tales* and am glad to have been exposed to it here) then persuaded an extremely mixed bag of authors, both old hands and comparative newcomers, to try their theme and it seems to me they all succeeded in coming up with entertaining variations and a couple managed to produce some really first-rate material which has the added bonus of being extremely varied. Charles Grant's "The Soft Sound of Wings," for example, is a dark and deeply layered study of each human's responsibility to all the rest whilst Katherine Kurtz's "The Gargoyle's Shadow" is an amusing bit of Blarney about Dublin's stone guardians and Lucy Taylor's "The Tempters" is a macabre morality tale very nicely told.

Another plus in this little volume is Nancy Kilpatrick's passing along the derivation of the word "gargoyle" during her Introduction. It comes from the French verb *gargouiller* which means to gurgle, which makes perfect sense when you consider the dear old things are basically water spouts.

Or so they would have you believe.

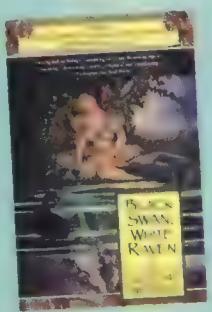
I suppose it's possible—*anything's* possible!—that you've never encountered one of Gordon R. Dickson's Hoka stories. If it is true you haven't then this is your lucky day because I am about to do you a great favor by helping to correct the situation. Dickson originally made the Hokas up back in the late '50s and every bit of their saga has been collected into the appropriately small volume ***Hoka! Hoka! Hoka!*** *(Baen Books, NYC; 305 pp.; paperback, $5.99).* Read it and you will know the whole truth.

The basic notion is that when a well-meaning outfit from our planet called the Interbeing League—responsible for contacting and supposedly improving all intelligent life in the

Continued on page 80

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference, introduction by Terry Brooks, Writer's Digest Books, hardcover $18.99. An invaluable guide written by writers for writers. A compelling sourcebook replete with medieval lore and fact, punishments of the Middle Ages, mythical creatures, fantasy societies, castle anatomy, ritual and magic ... indeed, a true power source that will surely help form the core of any fantasy writer's imagined world or tale.



Black Swan, White Raven, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, an Avon Books trade paperback, $13.00. This is the fourth book in the anthology series featuring modern retellings of fairy tales. Twenty-one tales by such notable authors as Joyce Carol Oates, Jane Yolen, John Crowley, and Don Webb can be found herein. Of course this charming book is full of witches, evil stepmothers, sleeping beauties, and a few "sobering truths" that lie beneath the surface of the "happily ever afters..." Distinct adult perspectives on beloved childhood stories. Co-editors and World Fantasy Award winners Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (popular author of RoF's "Folkroots" column) present a most enthralling collection for literary lovers of fantasy, fairy tales, and horror alike.

The Merlin Mystery, by Johnathan Gunson and Marten Coombe, a Warner Aspect hardcover, $21.00. "An elaborately constructed, intricate, yet ultimately solvable puzzle..." says David Chatten, CEO of MENSA. A cash prize of over $125,000 will be presented to the first reader to decipher the clues within this unique and exciting book. The contest will run until either the correct solution is received or December 31, 2001, whichever is sooner. Rules can be found on last page of book or may be obtained by calling toll free (877) 772-2150. One can also visit Web site at www.merlinmystery.com. A truly cerebral, beautifully illustrated treasure hunt. It is estimated the puzzle will take approximately 18 months to solve. Merlin's wand must be recovered ... will you be the wise and humble reader to discover the spell ... are you the brilliant and expert code breaker? If so, this book (and the prize?) is for you!

The Warlock in Spite Of Himself, by Christopher Stasheff, Ace trade paperback, $13.00. Published in 1970 and in print almost continuously since then, this book was one of the first to combine Sci-Fi and magic in the same plot. This particular volume is a special collector's edition, containing a new Introduction by the author. The tale is of Rodney d'Armand, a man of Hard Science who encounters a world filled with witches, warlocks, elves, and a redhead called Gwendolyn. The new reader will become enthralled with the novel that launched the incredible series ... and the familiar reader will be enthralled anew....

Owlflight, by Mercedes Lackey and Larry Dixon, a Daw Books, Inc., paperback, $6.99. The Peragiris Forest is the setting for the tale of young Darian, the child of hunters who never returned from the forest's great depth's. An apprentice to the Wizard Justyn, Darian is unable to break free of the mourning that accompanies the loss of his parents. He is unwilling to accept that the Wizard believes in his talent. Can this young boy's soul overcome its great grief? Can Darian save his village from barbarian invasion? With no interest in magic, and a deep desire to retreat to the private places of the forest, Darian is instead compelled toward a path of discovery and heroism in a tale that offers both renewal and adventure. These two authors make an "unbeatable team in fantastic magic and adventure...."

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BY THOMASINA GIBSON

The Crow *catapults from film to TV to climb a* Stairway to Heaven.

WHEN TALENTED SCI-FI WRITER BRYCE ZABEL WAS FIRST APPROACHED TO PITCH FOR the job as executive producer on *The Crow: Stairway to Heaven*, his initial concept was that "Even a dead man needs to get a life." Judging by the reception this innovative fantasy/drama has received in the States and Canada so far, it's an idea that has intrigued audiences as well as the powers that be at Polygram.

Very loosely based on the cult movie of the same name, *The Crow: Stairway to Heaven* follows the physical and metaphysical journey of a young man through Death, Life and all the facets in between on a voyage of discovery to hopefully find peace in the arms of the Love of his Life—um, Death.

Anyone familiar with the complicated workings of Bryce Zabel's mind will know, however that not everything in his series works out as expected. Aficionados of his revolutionary *Dark Skies* know that the infinite twists and turns of plot contained in that show challenged the viewer on any number of levels. The same goes for his interpretation of *Stairway to Heaven*.

BELOW: Martial arts talent Mark Dacascos steps into the role of Eric Draven.

"What we're trying to do is to paint a complete picture with 22 hours of film, and, as opposed to making those hours 22 interchangeable pieces, we're making them in such a way that they tell their own individual piece of a story, each with a beginning, middle, and end of it's own but which combine to make the entire 22 have a beginning, middle, and end as a series."

Commenting on the fact that the theory behind much of network broadcasting in the United States is based on the premise, "Don't make it too challenging. Keep it simple," Zabel is determined to give science fiction fans credit where it's due and "encourage them to embark on a journey along with the writers, producers, and cast."

"In the feature movie," he begins, "The Crow is all about revenge. He basically comes back, kills everybody, and then he's done, but I don't think you can have a TV show where the main character's occupation is killing everyone in sight." Zabel also doesn't think that you can have this character wrap up his story in two hours. "It's a whole different thing if this guy comes back and is stuck here—I mean—what's he going to do?"

Consequently much of the philosophy of the series comes from the thought that if he has already been murdered but he's back among the living, The Crow may want to be left alone but, of course, society won't let him be. Displaying his appropriately wicked sense of humor, Zabel laughs that in one particular episode, the landlord comes up to demand rent for Draven's abode. "The character may think, 'Hey, I'm a dead man, I have other things to do besides pay rent,' but the hard fact of Life is that Draven needs the loft because it's his portal to his other reality, the Land of the Dead, and no one is going to let him live in the place rent free." Continuing, he explains that "what we've tried to do with the show is create an alternative universe to the feature film that is equally as credible but has a lot more nuance and excitement."

The series accomplishes that with more than a change of cast and inventive new script ideas. The whole look of the television series has undergone an extensive re-think courtesy of director of photography Attila Szalay. He joined *The Crow* project after working for two years as a

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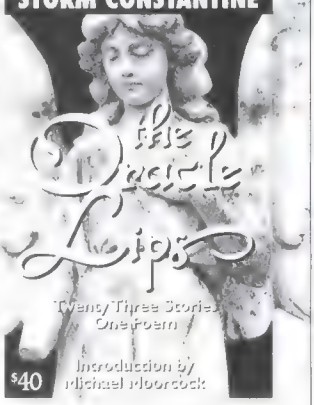

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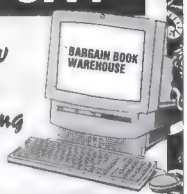

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ABOVE: Draven's loyalty for a woman he can't have strikes a chord with the female audience.

unit director of Photography on *The X-Files* and is responsible for re-creating *The Crow* universe in a way that is both attractive and palatable to a whole new audience, a particular challenge given the darkness of both the content and visuals of the original feature.

While he loved the movie he admits that, "I have a large TV in my house and a laser disc player and even on that I couldn't see half of it. In a darkened theater it's a different situation; however, we couldn't go that dark for television." By going back to the stylized look as epitomized by the comic book adventures, Szalay decided to incorporate a lot of color and use shades that make the program seem dark but which make it a little more vibrant than the movie.

Following a three-week pre-production process, he and production designer Ian Thomas began building the specially commissioned studio from scratch, creating the sets, prelighting them, and testing every scenario before approaching the producers with ideas. "They would listen, come down, take a look at the colors we'd painted, and in some cases suggest some changes, then I would alter the lighting to accommodate their ideas." He is incredibly enthusiastic about this collaborative approach. "What's exciting for me is the opportunity to establish a whole new look for the show. In *The X-Files* situation, I was taking over a show that had a pre-existing look. This time I've been given lots of leeway in deciding how everything comes together from the start—from interpreting how the colors would interact to which types of furniture and clothing were going to enhance the lighting and vice versa."

Executive producer Bryce Zabel has fond memories of the ongoing consultation process. "On *Dark Skies*," he quips, "we argued about the plot and J.F. Kennedy. On *The Crow* we fought about the color of the walls on Draven's loft." Both men are confident that the audience won't be disappointed with the finished article.

Although he's happy with the results of his efforts so far, Szalay, too, admits that it wasn't totally plain sailing in the beginning. As with any new production, budget limitations put constraints on what could be achieved financially. In common with more than half the productions currently filming in Vancouver, *The Crow* is filmed on Super 16mm as opposed to the 35mm used to film *The X-Files*. For those of us not technically gifted, this means that the finished TV product can have less of a "big feature" feel. As Szalay explains, "The problem is that if you try to go too dark with 16mm film the picture ends up very grainy—so by going for harsher color and using a lot of side and rim lighting on the characters, we prevent the color from looking flat and boring and raise the whole standard to a quality product."

Quality comes in many different facets and this is reflected in *The Crow*'s cast as much as anywhere else. By choosing the multitalented Mark Dacascos as Eric Draven, the producers felt they were on to a winner. Bryce Zabel: "Casting is so very interesting, because so many times you can cast someone who is a fantastic actor but who doesn't have any chemistry whatsoever with the people they're with." This is clearly not the case with Hawaiian-born Dacascos.

One of Hollywood's most promising young leading men, he is drawn to The Crow's psyche in more ways than one. When asked how he got involved with the project he reveals that "I saw the movie that Brandon did and loved it." When the audi-

tion came up, he bought the actual comic book, read it, and was "totally blown away" by its intensity. "Once the script came in for the pilot episode which is based on Love and Life after Death, which are issues which I and most other people think of on a regular basis, I decided that the opportunity to play Draven was too good to pass up."

Given that he's also a world-renowned martial arts expert, Dacascos was delighted to combine his love of physical action with the more spiritual aspects of the show. "I consider myself a student of martial arts and love doing action, but with this role, there's so much more substance because Draven is fighting to be with the Love of his Life and his Death, his soulmate." Another major point of interest is that the action stems from the character's need to learn that not everything in regular Life is about him and Shelley; that it comes from the development of the story and not just because the producer needs to show a fight scene every 10 minutes."

Considering himself to be a passionate man, the actor insists, "What I love about *The Crow* is that it is so real and intense. The strongest emotion in the show is Love but if you take a pinch of the intense energy which that generates and turn it in a different direction, you get Hate or something else which is that powerful, and finding that balance is what makes the whole premise of the show for me. It comes from the heart."

His passionate persona is certainly pleasing *The Crow*'s steadily increasing audience but what intrigues the executive producer is the fact that, contrary to early expectations, there are just as many women watching as there are men. "We thought that having a martial arts specialist in the lead role would attract the male viewer, but the fact that he is so wildly in love with the woman he can't have yet remains very loyal to her, strikes a chord with many of the women watching."

Dacascos agrees and adds that the show's view that Life is temporary and transitory and that Death is just a stage you go through is just as enticing. He feels that far from being gloomy and depressing, the show actually is a celebration of Life and how we should live every moment of it to the full. Citing the pilot episode as one of his favorites, he also reveals that episodes eight and nine are very special to him. In the former, he gets visited by a character called the Skull Cowboy, played by Kadeen Hardison. "It's a great episode partly because of the strength of the cast, but also because of the subject matter. Shelley's soul gets popped into another woman's body and I have to deal with that." Episode nine sees him go through some past-life regression when we get to learn how The Crow came to be. A classic "period piece," Dacascos got to play three different characters in the episode and feels it is the one he is most

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ABOVE: Eric Draven is The Crow, a dead man walking among the living, looking for life and purpose.

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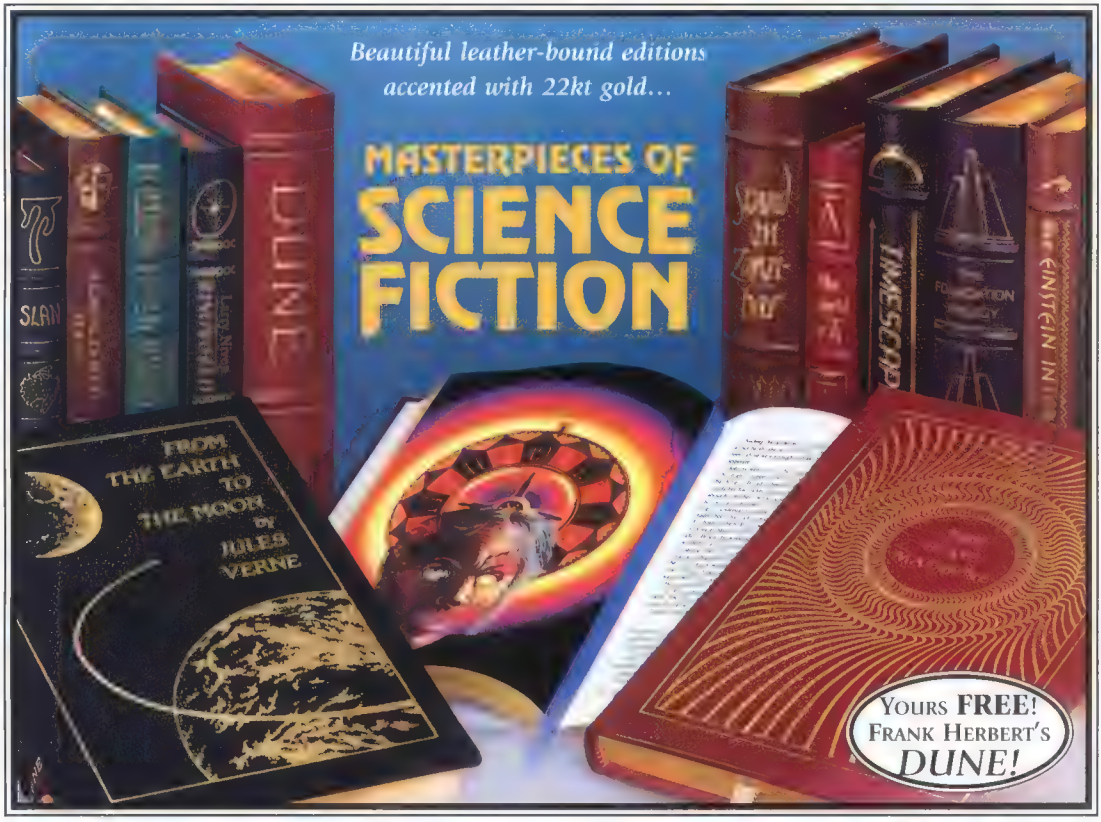
Possessed of a mischievous sense of the ridiculous himself, the actor is confident that the black humor contained in *The Crow: Stairway to Heaven* has its own attraction. "You know," he laughs, "when you accept that we're one of the only shows on TV at the moment where a couple of the lead characters are dead, you have to admit to having a bit of a sense of humor to watch the show." Giggling over the fact that the production team, having found out that he'd been back to Hawaii on holiday, suggested that they film one episode with The Crow in an Aloha shirt, surf shorts, and a flower behind his right ear, Dacascos has nothing but praise for the way in which the team works together to bring the more serious aspects of the show together. "We really click—yes, we have our spats, that's just human nature, but our cast and crew really do get along. We believe in what we are doing and are learning from each other every day."

Zabel is more than pleased with the way the production is developing day by day and is eager to see what the reaction is from their audience when they begin to suspect the various intricacies he's incorporated into the series. "It gets weirder and weirder," he reveals with glee. "Just when you think, 'I've got this show figured out,' we blow away what we've done before.... We're pretty straight until around episode eight then we start to go off the deep end." He compares it to setting a hook on a fish. "If you just pull on the rod right away, you probably won't even get the fish. But if you just play with the fish a little bit until it's nice and hooked then you yank on it, it's yours. We're doing the yanking right now!"

All indications are that this Crow has landed quite nicely, thank you, but as its executive producer warns, "All is not quite as it seems." There are certainly some shocking surprises in store for this bird and his followers in the coming weeks. Watch this space!



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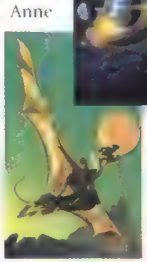

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BY JOSEPH MONTI

Charles de Lint reflects on fantasy, mythology, and consensual reality.

CHARLES DE LINT IS A LITERARY PATHFINDER. THIS OTTAWA CITIZEN BEGAN WRITING traditional high-fantasy stories in the late '70s/early '80s, culminating most notably in the two novels, *The Riddle of the Wren*, and *The Harp of the Gray Rose*, which were originally released in 1984 and 1985, respectively.

It is his work set in contemporary times, or "urban fantasy," however, for which he is best known and loved, beginning with 1984's groundbreaking *Moonheart*. In these urban fantasies, de Lint positions the world of traditional mythology within our modern world in an effort to illuminate the inner landscape of his characters through the interaction of these two worlds.

On the strength of *Moonheart*, he won the William L. Crawford Award for Best New Fantasy Author of 1984, presented by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. His work has continued to garner other awards and honors including the 1988 Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Award (now known as the Aurora) for Best Work in English, for *Jack, the Giant Killer*, and placements on the final ballots of both Aurora and World Fantasy awards.

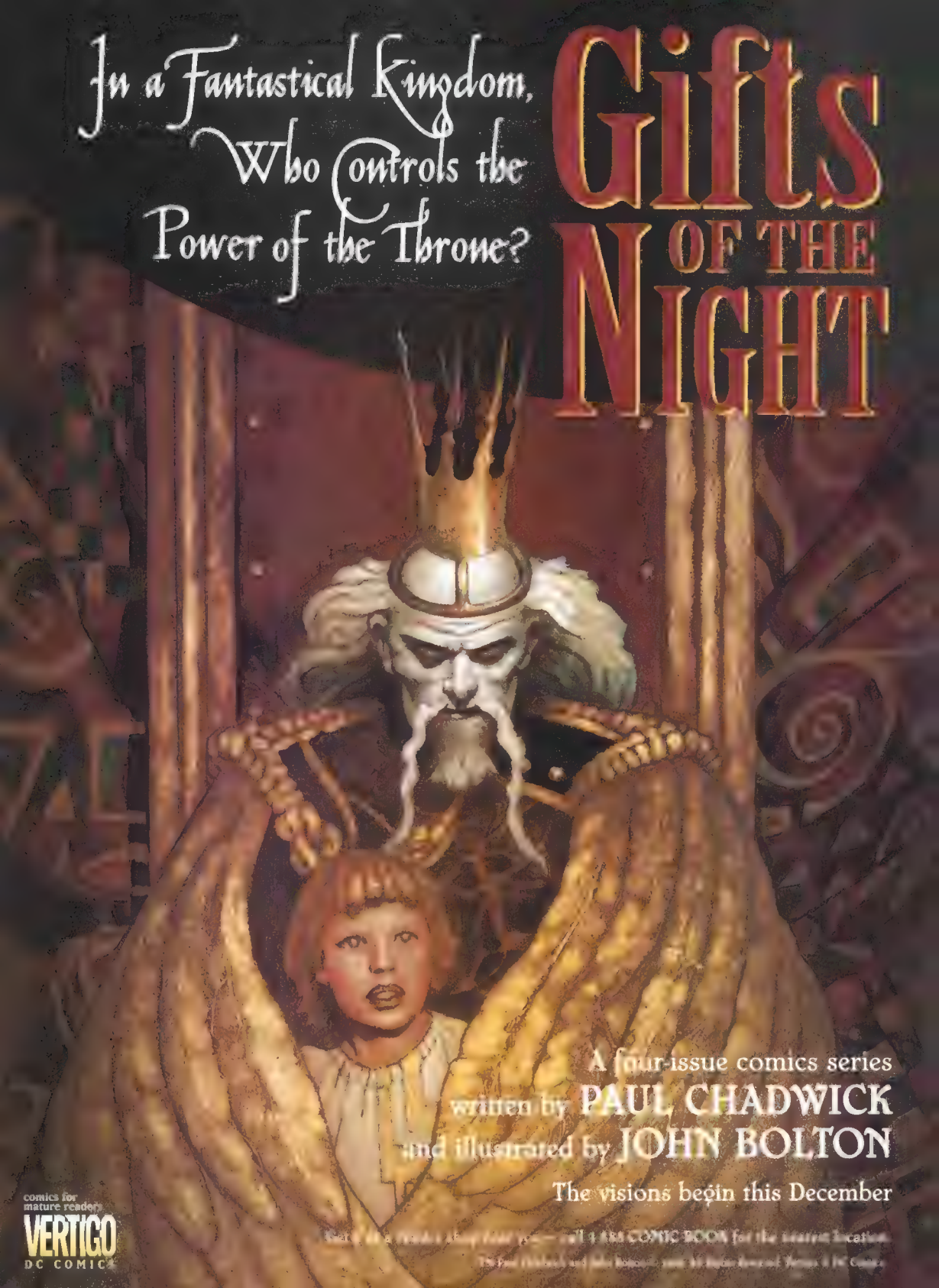
His more recent work, beginning with the short story collection *Dreams Underfoot*, and continuing through *Memory and Dream*, *The Ivory and the Horn*, *Trader*, and *Someplace to Be Flying*, has been set in the fictional city of Newford. Newford is a combination of many modern American and Canadian cities, a place where the lines between myth and reality blur. His growing popularity as one of fantasy's most respected and best-selling authors more than validates my enthusiasm for his body of work. De Lint is also quite accomplished in other forms of creative expression including comic books, book reviews (including a monthly column for *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*), the visual arts, and his first love, Celtic music.

BELOW: Charles de Lint takes us to a realm full of ancient and earthly magic in Into The Green. *Painting by John Howe.*

JM: If you don't mind, I'd like to start from the beginning to get an idea how some of your re-occurring themes are rooted in your life. You started writing, in earnest, in the late '70s. That would've put you in your late 20s. You were working in, and then managing, a record store before you gave yourself fully to writing. Looking back, is this the road you'd hoped to be traveling on?

CdL: Well, I've been writing since I was about 14. I used to write reams and reams of romantic poetry -romance with a capital 'R' stuff. The first book I ever wrote was a novel-length poem in the William Morris style, which was just a dreadful thing. I also used to have a lot of pen pals. So I was writing constantly, just all the time. But I never thought I'd be a writer. I wanted to be a musician. I just chose the wrong kind of music (laughing). In the early/mid-'seventies Celtic music wasn't happening at all- -you have to remember, this was pre-Pogues, pre-Riverdance; before the recent upsurge of interest in Celtic music—so I ended up playing in a lot of bars and a few folk festivals, and that got old pretty fast.

I continued to write all the while but never considered it as a career until I literally stumbled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into marketing my work. A few early initial sales to small press magazines showed me that people would pay you money for what you write and that it was a viable career option. It was certainly better for me than working in retail for the rest of my life. After those first few sales I went a long time before actually selling anything to more professional markets, but I certainly have no regrets. I'm very happy to be doing something I love.

JM: Tell me more about your wife MaryAnn Harris. She's obviously very influential, specifically in regards to your work.

CdL: Besides occasionally generating story ideas, she does all the first editing on my stories and novels before they leave the house. Sometimes the changes are large, sometimes minor, depending on what's needed. I can't tell you how helpful it is to have that more objective eye view the work. I don't use all her suggestions, but I do tend to use a lot of them. Plus, she's always believed in me—all the way back to when it was just an idea and I had nothing concrete to show for my efforts beyond a stack of finished manuscripts and the usual collection of rejection letters that we all get when we're starting out.

Before we could both make a living from my writing, we would take turns working at more mundane jobs to support each other's art. It's a give and take, which is what all good relationships are about. The thing that's important about MaryAnn is that she's my friend as well as my wife and lover. Someone I can hang out with. We have a lot in common with our music and our art.

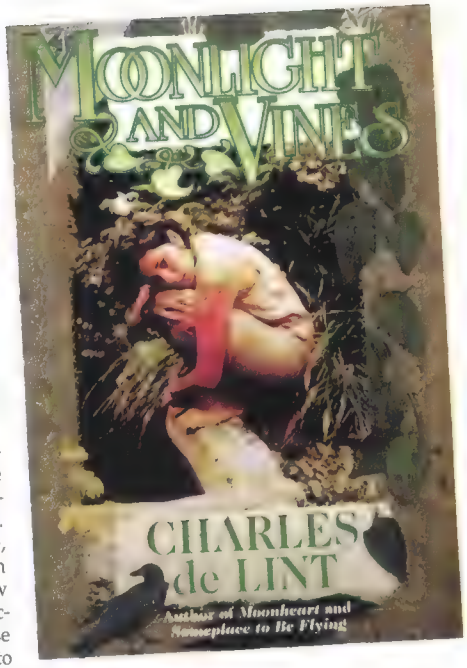
These days she's also the business manager in the partnership that is my career, which gives me more time to work on the actual writing.

JM: OK, before I begin asking about your writing, let's briefly go over consensual reality. It's the theory that roots quite a lot of your work. Can you explain it? Do you consider this to be the thing that makes the fantastical elements in your stories plausible?

CdL: The whole idea of consensual reality is that things are the way they are only because that's what we've all agreed to. I don't like to worry about the plausibility of it. The reason I like to have supernatural or extra-natural elements in stories is because I like the little buzz it gives. But I also like exploring what happens when ordinary people are experiencing that kind of thing. To me that is always a story, and it can always be a different story because people are always different.

JM: As *Moonlight and Vines*, your third Newford collection of stories, was just released this January 1999, let's start there. What do you find is distinctive about it?

CdL: Start off with a tough question! I guess the basic thing with me is the continuity. A new collection tells us what happened next with the familiar characters. Now since they can't all have life-changing experiences from story to story, the regular cast is usually kept in the background while new active characters take the forefront. So you get new people, new stories, but also a continuity taking place in the background: How are our old friends faring, what's happening in the city itself. I sometimes think that the best way for people to read, not only my own work but



Author, Celtic folklorist, and musician, Charles de Lint.

every author's work, is to read it in the exact order that it was written because even in unrelated books, an ongoing story is running in the background, if only in terms of theme and style. I know that when I write a book, the next book I write, or the next story I write, will retain some of the underpinnings of the one before it. Not a lot, but there will be a few. The new work will continue on down its own road, but if the books are read in the same sequence as they were written, a reader can follow the various paths that led to the current work. I find that interesting in the work of others. Of course it's not something that can really happen these days.

JM: Why not? I read the Newford books, pretty much in order from *Dreams Underfoot* to *Someplace to Be Flying*, and there is a progression.

CdL: Well, yes. The stories in the collections are presented pretty much in the order they were written, but then you have the novels and you have to think, where do you insert them. For instance, with the newest collection I wrote at least two novels in between these stories. So the novels, rather than taking place before or after this collection, would take place somewhere in the middle.

JM: So, in terms of your own work, what underlying themes do you see in your progression from high fantasy to your Newford work? And where do the Samuel M. Key horror novels fit into this?

CdL: My themes are really basic: Be true to those who have earned your trust, that a family of choice can be as viable as a family of blood, leave the world a little better than it was when you got there, treat people the way you'd have them treat you. The stories are about a lot of other things, but that's what lies underneath them all, even the horror novels. I'm an optimistic writer. I don't want to ignore the ills of the world; I want to offer workable alternatives to those ills. I want to remind people of the wonders that do exist, and those that might. To paraphrase Barry Lopez, I want to contribute to a literature of hope, to create a body of work in which people can discover trustworthy patterns.

JM: What are your feelings about the fantasy field? Do you feel that traditional high fantasy has written itself into a corner?

CdL: I'm going to say definitely yes, even while I know that I might turn around tomorrow and read someone like Pat McKillip, who still manages to infuse a freshness and sense of wonder in a secondary world fantasy and then I'll have to eat my words. To be honest, I can't say the problem I have with most high fantasy—you know, the stories set in a secondary world with their quests and motley bands of heroes, evil dark lords and all—is necessarily in the books themselves. It's that I've seen too much of it. Tolkien was fresh for me, but his clones aren't, because I've

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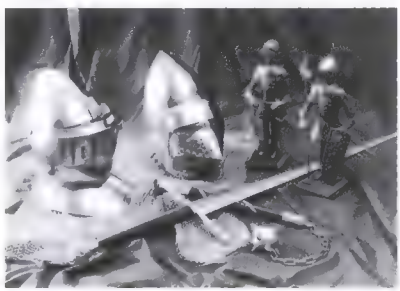

already read that story, in all its many variations. When I first got interested in fantasy, it didn't exist as a genre. Until Lin Carter came along with the Unicorn series for Ballantine, I didn't realize how much of it there was. Through the books he got into print and recommended I became enamored with an entire flood of wondrous writing, books by Lord Dunsany, William Morris, E.R. Eddison, James Branch Cabell, and any number of others. But the difference with these books, compared to what I see on the stands now, is that they were all different from one another. They gave the reader a fantasy buzz (along with a lot more), but each did it in his own way.

JM: OK, on to another traditional question: You've written one science fiction novel, *Svaha*, which is an interesting shift compared to the rest of your work, so I was wondering what you think of science fiction?

CdL: I used to read more SF at one time than I do now, but I think that was because there wasn't enough fantasy being published to give me the kind of sense of wonder I prefer, which is less technological and more human. In other words, I like to see real people react to magical wonders more than I do technological ones. I grew up on Andre Norton, Clifford Simak, Philip José Farmer, Roger Zelazny, and the like. But you'll note that these are SF writers whose work was more character-driven than, say, Asimov or Clarke. These days a great deal of what I read is published outside the genre. Things like *Green Grass, Running Water* by Thomas King, *The Antelope Wife* by Louise Erdrich, and much of Alice Hoffman's later work. It's harder to find the Good Stuff in the field because so often it gets lost in the huge morass of same-old, same-old. But it is out there.

JM: I've spoken sporadically with Terri Windling about the problems of literary works of fantasy being placed in the ghetto of literature, and she's mentioned the term "mythic fiction," which you've both come up with as an encompassing label. Would you describe it?

CdL: It's basically stories that are set here and now, dealing with all the concerns and problems we have going on in our contemporary lives. But it utilizes mythological and folkloric elements to either exaggerate problems or solutions in the story, whether as metaphor or whatnot, to enhance what you're talking about. In Terri's and my own case, especially, it also involves creativity—the how and why behind it, the results of creating a thing, the life it can acquire on its own. And by such I don't simply mean literal life so much as how its influence can be felt in people's lives. One of the points Terri and I were making is that if you're going to be in a ghetto you might as well be in one of your own choosing.

I was talking with Guy Kay about this not too long ago and, to be frank, the way

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you're considered in literature all depends on what genre your first book gets published in. If your first book is a fantasy novel, then you're forever considered a fantasy writer. Likewise, if your first book is a mainstream book, you're forever a mainstream writer. I'm almost shocked by how much fantasy pervades the general culture from movies like *Liar, Liar* to *Big* and some of John Travolta's recent films. All these movies have a fantasy element in them.

I don't know why, but I still get shocked about this sort of thing. The fantastic is so prevalent and popular in mainstream film, TV, books, and the like, and yet when something is published in the fantasy field, people tend to look down their noses at it. Go figure.

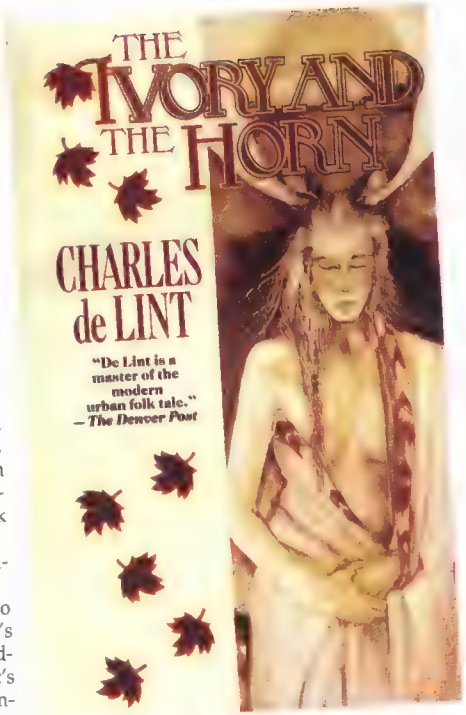
JM: Can you think of any solutions?

CdL: No, because there are no solutions. It's not the publisher's fault, the bookseller's fault, the reader's fault, or the writer's fault—it's everybody's fault. I know I contribute to the problem with my own reading habits.

Sometimes I feel like reading, say, a mystery novel and I like being able to go to the mystery section to see what's new instead of having to look through the entire store. But as an author, I would much prefer all the fiction to be generally filed in alphabetical order. I don't feel resentful as to where I'm shelved; what I feel is a certain frustration. But that's only because I've received letters, E-mail, etc., from readers saying that "I don't read fantasy, so I never would have read your book but (for whatever reason) I ended up reading it and loved it." It frustrates me that I don't get to communicate to the audience that I know is out there for this material.

JM: Well then, let me ask you about writing short stories. In an interview with Lawrence Schimel (Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine*, Issue #32, Summer 1996) you said: "I usually only write short stories when they're commissioned because I enjoy seeing what I can do with the theme of whatever anthology it's going into." So how do the five original tales within this collection differ?

CdL: Well, two of the stories were comic book scripts. One of the stories, "Twa Corbies," was originally a comic book script for Charles Vess's *Ballads and Sagas*. When it came time to put this collection together, I wanted that story in there but I didn't think that a script would be all that interesting for my readers, so I rewrote it as a short story—which causes its own problems, because one of the things I like about writing comic book scripts is that you can



have two stories going on at the same time. One's happening in the captions while the other one's happening in the pictures. That's really hard to do in prose, so I had to fiddle around with it quite a bit to get it to work in a prose format.

The other story was "If I Close My Eyes Forever." That originally appeared in a comic book anthology edited by Joe Lansdale and it was the same thing again, I didn't feel like I could put the script in there so I rewrote it—that one was even harder to do! The other three were basically Christmas cards, originally published in chapbook form by Triskell Press, and in one case, a story for an anthology that's been so delayed, my collection came out before it did.

JM: Can you expand upon your work with Charles Vess? How did it come about, what was the dynamic of the process like, was it more of a collaborative effort or...?

CdL: Well, Charles and I have known each other for over 20 years now and we always like to find ways we can work together. We've had various projects vaguely planned over the years—book-length material—but they invariably fell through because we either couldn't fit our schedules together, or we couldn't afford the time to do the work on spec. One of my favorites was a journal/sketchbook approach to a novel in which we'd both share the writing and art chores. I'd still like to do that and maybe one day we will. But until we can work on something longer, well...we have many similar interests—in music, in art, in fiction—and we've been friends for too long

not to sneak in little projects when we can. I love his idea of doing illustrated versions of the ballads, but unfortunately, both of the ones I've done for him were his illustrating my scripts. One of these days I'd like to do a more collaborative comic book with him because besides being one of my favorite people, he's also one of my favorite artists and a fine storyteller in his own right.

JM: Getting back to your prose, what's left for Newford? Are you still excited about the possibilities of writing in that setting, or are you afraid of getting into a rut with these books?

CdL: Newford's a place I still like to explore and if I'm going to have a break from a book and have some fun writing a short story, then I might as well visit with people whose company I enjoy being in. It's like, if you have spare time, you go visit your friends. Well, the next novel's set in Newford so, obviously, I still feel that I can do something with the setting. But the fear of getting into a rut is one of the reasons why I think every book is a little harder for me to write, because I'm conscious of the fact that I don't want to repeat myself. Now maybe I am, as I don't think it's possible for a writer to have completely new themes, new styles, etc., every book out. But that's also one of the reasons we like to follow certain writers, because we like their writing style. What I find is that the larger my body of work becomes, the harder it is to go into new territory. And I do want to go into new territory.

The other thing that can hinder me, the more I write, is that I find I'm also becoming far more critical of what I'm putting on paper [laughing]. So I worry at it a lot more than I did before—and I used to rewrite a lot.

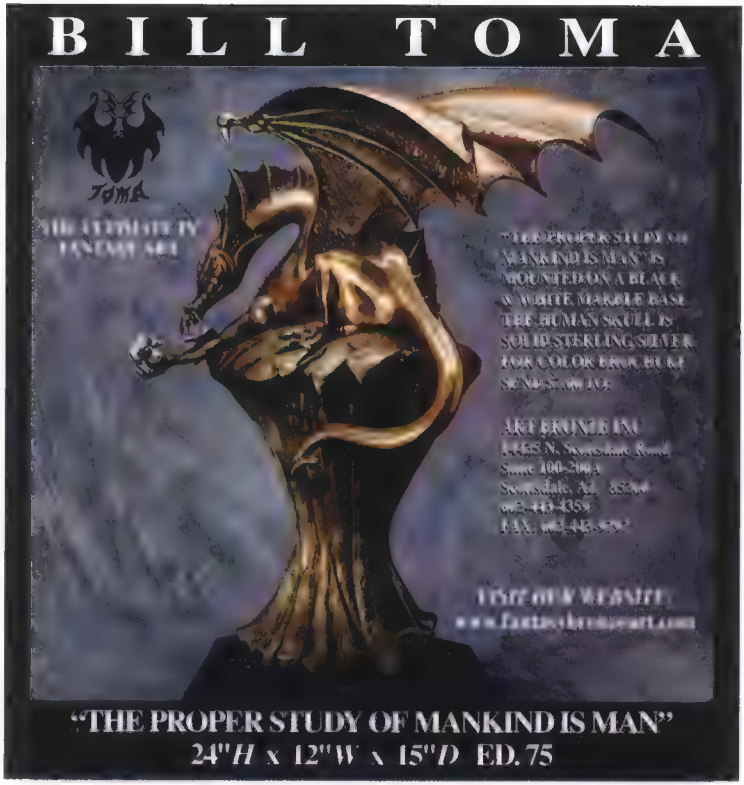
JM: Do you think you're too attached to your characters?

CdL: When I'm writing a book, certainly. Afterwards, I can find some distance—especially when I start working on a new book. Then the new cast takes precedence in my mind, much the same way we shift from one group of co-workers to another when changing jobs. We still like the old co-workers, and think of them, but we don't necessarily spend as much time with them anymore.

JM: I know you don't like to discuss works in progress, but is there anything you feel comfortable telling us concerning your next novel?

CdL: I can tell you that it deals with a Latin American healer, displaced Irish *genii loci* (the guardian spirits of a place), winter, creativity, record store clerks, and other unrelated elements, but not much more than that. I don't want to kill the joy of discovery that I get when I'm writing by talking too much about a project. The working title is *Little Forests of the Heart*.

For more information on de Lint's work, visit his website at: www.cyberus.ca.



Our world may change around us but our natures never will. Or will they?

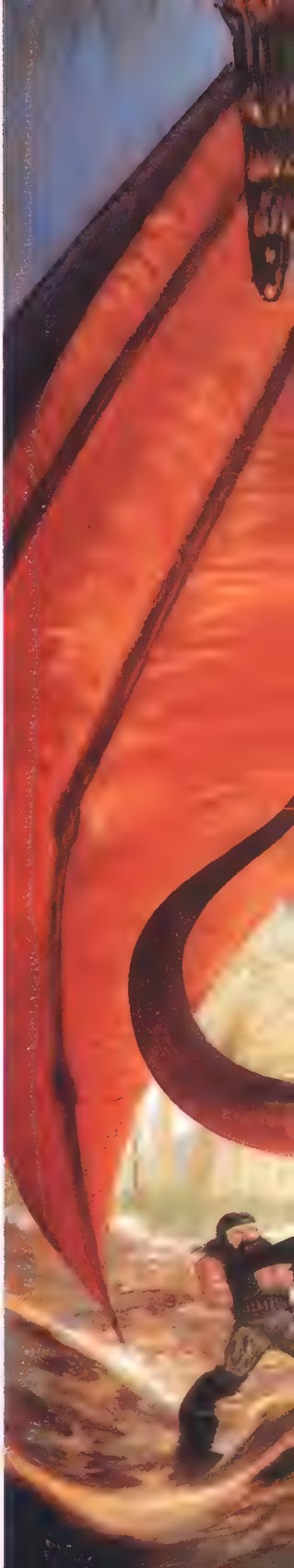
DRAGONS AND OTHER EXTINCTIONS

BY PATRICK WEEKES

Illustration by Alan Pollack

The squirrel's ears twitched, catching the call of a distant jaybird and discarding it as harmless. Her bushy gray tail flicked excitedly, but she was no more aware of this than she was of the movement of her ears. All her attention was focused on the startling green pine cone held in her paws. Ignoring the pricks to her paws, she held the cone close and sniffed it. Her nose quivered as the scent gave information about the tree, the animals nearby, the upcoming weather for the woods in this area.

There was a knock at the door. With a wrenching loss of concentration I came back to my own body, separated from the squirrel by only a few yards and a sliding glass door; a moment of disorientation followed as I adjusted to my own senses again, the pain in my knees from



crouching for too long mixed with a distant hunger pang. The squirrel chittered at me, wondering why I was getting up and warning me to stay away. I soothed her with a gesture, said goodbye, and wondered idly who was disturbing my rest.

As I turned from the window to the back yard I glanced at the sun; 3:30. It was five hours to the nearest town, which meant that my intruder was probably going to want to stay the night. If it was a friend, I could sigh and deal with it; they knew my need for space and wouldn't disturb me unless it was important. If it was another ranger or government official, well, we'd see. I'm not sure whether to shout or burst out laughing when someone a tenth of my age tries to tell me my business.

The front door banged again, loud enough to hurt my sensitive ears. That ruled out one of my own kind. The harsh, jarring crash would set any of our teeth on edge, as would knocking twice in 30 seconds. That kind of impatience is found only in the young.

Steeling myself for the unpleasantness ahead, I undid the deadbolt and opened the door.

The figure outside came up only to my chest. The wild-looking black beard was almost a mirror of his unkempt, shaggy hair, and dark beady eyes peered out from underneath bushy eyebrows—though I was sure he was considered handsome by his kind's standards. Knowing my sensitivity he had showered the night before, but I could still catch the smell of fresh, tangy sweat accumulated from the drive up. It was a sharp, brutish odor no amount of bathing could ever erase—not that any of them have really tried, mind you.

"Durag," I said graciously to the dwarf, "come on in."

"GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, ETHERIAN," HE SAID IN HIS RUMBLY VOICE as he settled back into the armchair I had offered him. It was smaller and bulkier than the others in the house, more suited to dwarfen proportions; it also had dark brown upholstery, to better hide the dirt and grime he would inevitably leave. Durag tried, I'm sure, when he remembered to, but he was still a dwarf.

"It's been half a century," I said, moving into the kitchen and opening the refrigerator. Aside from elven wine, which I remembered him disliking, there was no alcohol. "Is apple cider all right?"

"Didn't expect you'd have Gurk's Mountain Finest!" he declared, and chortled at his joke. I brought out a glass and a mug, and set the mug in front of him. He took a long drink; I sipped my own cider reflectively.

I knew what he wanted. A dwarf's mind isn't that much more complicated than a rodent's, really. I knew he still made his living off the hunt—there probably wasn't anything else he was qualified to do—and I knew that lately the hunt had been losing popularity, and thus profitability. And since I had taught him everything he knew, it stood to reason that he was coming back to his retired mentor to beg for help. Typical.

"Did you have good weather driving up here?" Windy, with a few clouds, but otherwise beautiful; I had observed a migrating bluebird for a few hours that morning.

"What?" The dwarf was confused by the question. "Oh, yes. Fine, it was. Sunny, nice breeze."

"It's supposed to be overcast this weekend, though. At least, the weatherman thought so."

"Watch television, then, you do? Keep up in the world?" Here it came, Durag's sledgehammer-subtle transition. See if the elf keeps up in world events, mention the political debates over the hunt, see what he thinks, then suggest that he might help improve its reputation. He even thinks he's being subtle; for a dwarf I suppose he is, but the most cunning and discreet of them can hardly compete with a whiny elven precentennial.

"I like to observe what's going on, even if I no longer participate." There. I'd said it. If he didn't take that as a warning that I wasn't coming back, it was his own fault for missing it.

"What do you think of the talks going on? Sounds like next year's political dividing line is going to be the hunt."

"Oh, I don't get much into politics, except to remember the president's name." Elves didn't much care for the government of civilization. What use is the illusionary control of the masses when compared to the subtle power of living in harmony with and mastery of nature, or learning the intricate dance of science, or making music that burns itself into the soul? The younger races scrabble in the dirt for crumbs; only we know what true power is.

"Surely you have some opinion, elf!" he protested, probably frustrated now by my evasions. "Hunt was your life for six hundred years."

"The hunt was my job for six hundred years," I corrected. Hiding my smile, I sank back comfortably into my chair. If nothing else, I could play word games with the dwarf. "And now I'm retired."

"Bah, elf!" he growled. "Told me that 70 years ago, and I didn't believe you then. Hunt isn't a job you can quit when you like. A dance, it is." Dwarfs didn't dance, which meant he was trying to reach my level of thought. "Burns in the blood." It wasn't bad, actually; he was roughly paraphrasing something I had told him more than a century ago. It had been a starless night, just the two of us around the campfire. I could almost smell the pine smoke again. Say what you will about them, dwarfs know how to bring back memories.

"Not this blood." I looked over through the sliding glass door to where the squirrel still toyed with the pine cone. "The dance has changed, and I no longer know the steps or the tune."

"Etherian." He said it slowly and deliberately, and I knew that he had finally decided to come clean and ask me flat-out. "I'm having trouble paying the bills. May lose my home if I don't get a successful hunt soon."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said flatly. "But what do you want me to do about it?" I didn't actually say the last part, but I didn't really have to. Durag heard it as plainly as I did.

"I've taken on an apprentice, a new boy, untrained in the hunt. Needs someone to train him, teach him the ropes."

"You know everything I do, Durag. I'm sure you're an excellent teacher."

"Please, elf." He leaned forward. "The thing is, I…"

"You what?" I knew what he was going to say, knew that he was coming around to it since the moment I opened the door. But if I was going to leave my cabin—and somewhere deep inside me I had known that I would, because I can never deny my friends anything—if I was going to leave the cabin, he was going to have to say it out loud.

"I need you. I can't do this alone."

I looked around my cabin. Comfortable wood paneling, subtle blending shades of brown and gray and green. I'd developed my home for more than half a century, and it was almost a part of me. It would almost be a physical pain to leave it.

But Durag was a friend, dwarfish though he was, and he needed me. He'd said so himself.

"What's the new boy's name?"

"Gwyrnath."

GWYRNATH WAS A CENTAURAN NAME, AS I REMEMBERED; THAT boded ill. Although stronger than the humans had been, and a bit more sensitive to the flow of nature, they were nevertheless a rough race. Most often they were as blunt as the dwarfs, and their lives lasted barely a century. Even the old ones were inexperienced youngsters.

I held back a frown as I packed my equipment. Exuberant, headstrong, impatient. They were everything the humans had been, except for the magic. In that respect they were as bereft as any other race.

When I was only 40, I had seen a human mage demonstrate his spells at a fair. I remembered turning to my mother in jealousy, asking why the humans could do so much that we couldn't….

I shook my head, clearing the old memory from my head, and kept

packing. The younger races get their wisdom from memories, and seem to think that we do as well. But the truth is that as we get older, we learn that the experience, not the memory of the experience, is what's truly important.

A sturdy pair of hiking boots. My old down-lined sleeping bag. A stainless steel hunting knife, with a compass imbedded in the hilt.

I could see the dance of light on the knife as it flew end over end across the cavern. The air was heavy and burned my lungs, and across the smoky darkness I could hear Xantius shouting....

The thought flickered and died as I let it go. Dwarfs and centaurs think themselves wise because they dwell on what happened to them, because they let the past become the present. Only the elves have learned to move on, to remember the lesson without the attached pain. One of our philosophers once said we live longest because our souls travel lightest.

I zipped up the pack, slipped it over one shoulder as if it were the arm of an old friend, and closed the door behind me as I went out to Durag's jeep.

"Got everything?" he asked, starting the engine.

"I think so. My rifle is probably a little out of date; I suspected you might have something newer." I looked over at him, and he nodded in confirmation. "Anything more complicated than point and shoot?"

"Sighting's a little different." Durag shrugged. "Don't remember you much cared about that, though. Legendary elven marksmanship and all." He grinned a conspiratorial grin and shifted into first gear. The jeep leaped forward, acrid smell stinging my nose and roaring engine pounding in my ears.

"Are we going to meet Gwyrnath in town?" I asked, more to distract myself from the dwarf's driving than out of any real curiosity. I had never really gotten used to being under the control of the jeep; I could empathize with a horse, feel its emotions through the muscles in its shoulder and back, but the machine didn't feel anything. The jeep was a convertible, and the wind tore across my face almost painfully; I had to squint against the force of it, which annoyed me even further. The younger races have a lot of stereotypes about squint-eyed, pointy-eared elves. They never seemed to learn how to see past the appearances of others.

"Yes, he'll meet us there," Durag said. "Thought you'd be more comfortable if I came up alone." I nodded absently, barely catching his words over the wind, and he went on. "About a day's drive to the site, and another to hike up after the road ends."

"A full day's hike?" I asked. "Is this going to be a mountain job?"

Durag looked away from the road and at me, and I clutched at the armrest until I could feel the metal under the leather biting into the flesh of my hand. "Wouldn't bring you out for an easy job, elf."

I laughed from the insanity of his driving, and from the misplaced sincerity in his voice. "Sure you would!" I called over the wind. "You'd drag me back into the hunt just to prove you could do it!"

Durag stared at me incredulously, then turned back to the road and made a hairpin turn that slammed me against my seatbelt. "You're probably right!" he declared with a roaring belly laugh. "I would. Remember that time in the tavern when I talked you into that blindfolded shooting contest with the centaur?"

The dwarf drove on, babbling in his gravelly voice about what he thought of as old times, and slowly I began to relax.

WHEN WE REACHED THE TOWN IT WAS WELL AFTER SUNSET. DURAG pulled into a restaurant parking lot, killed the engine, and wiped the grime from his face. "Should be inside," the dwarf grunted, and got out of the jeep without further comment. I slipped out as well, and stretched my arms and shoulders gratefully.

"Durag!" The voice was loud enough to hurt my sensitive ears. I looked to the door of the restaurant, and got my first look at the new boy.

Gwyrnath was huge, tall even for one of his own kind. His lower half was brown spotted with white—I liked horses, but had never bothered to figure out the exact names centaurs used for coloration. His torso was massively developed; that was obvious even through the oversized, baggy sweatshirt he was wearing. "Hyrnan University Polo," I read, and smiled at the logo of a centaur heroically wielding a mallet. Durag always picked the best and the brightest, although how he convinced a university student to join the hunt was beyond me. Durag was pretty persuasive sometimes, for a dwarf.

"You must be Gwyrnath." I stepped forward and extended my right hand palm up, fingers splayed out and thumb curled into the palm. "It is a pleasure to meet you." I hadn't met many centaurs recently, and hoped the greeting gesture hadn't changed much. Centaurs have many rituals, the roots of which I doubt even they remember. Perhaps they need the symbols to put some depth into their ephemeral lives. The dwarfs are the same way, to a lesser extent.

Instead of returning the greeting, Gwyrnath tucked his forearm against his stomach and bowed at the waist. "And an honor to meet you, sir," he returned in that same booming voice. I stifled a grimace and returned the bow.

Centaurs had a popular misconception that bowing was an elven custom. The truth was that bowing had started with the humans; elves adopted it out of courtesy. Dwarfs, being dwarfs, didn't bow to anyone, so after the humans died out the only ones left bowing had been the elves. Now, centuries later, the centaurs thought they were being cultured and polite, and we put up with them. History left us elves being polite about a lot of things.

"Durag tells me you're eager to go," I said, stepping past him and into the restaurant.

"That's right, sir!" he called out behind me. "I can't wait to start hunting dragons!"

THE RESTAURANT WASN'T MUCH TO SPEAK OF, BUT DURAG WAS paying so he got to choose. A surly dwarf waitress took our order. Durag had steak and potatoes; Gwyrnath had chicken. I had a fruit plate, and the uncomfortable sensation of being the only elf in the room. I wasn't surprised—the death and dirt and sweat in the air were enough to turn my stomach, and I was used to dealing with the younger races—but I could feel grubby eyes touching me. Surprised, uncomfortable, fearful. Jealous.

"So, Gwyrnath, why dragon hunting?" I asked, trying to get my mind off the stares.

"It was my grandsire's suggestion, actually," the young man answered, flushing slightly. He was clean shaven; that at least was a point in his favor. "He said it built character, gave young men a sense of purpose. It's summer term now, and I needed a job, so ...." He shrugged and swallowed a gigantic mouthful of chicken. "Here I am."

"Here you are," I echoed. Durag made a face I guessed to be apologetic. "Do you know how to use a gun?"

"Yes, sir." His head bobbed enthusiastically. "I hunted game as a child, and Durag has spent the past couple of weeks teaching me how to use heavy weaponry."

I nodded, fine elflike features betraying none of my vexation. Hunting game. For sport, most likely. I kept an open mind about most customs of the younger races—I was practically in bed with them, by the standards of my own people—but sometimes the only conclusion I could reach was that dwarfs and centaurs had never mastered more than the veneer of civilization. "Excellent. If Durag has been teaching you, I have no doubt..." I broke off as I saw Gwyr-

MUCH MORE COMPLICATED THAN A RODENT'S, REALLY.

nath staring past me at the front counter. After a moment, I gave in to curiosity and glanced over my shoulder.

The waitress behind the counter wasn't a classic elven beauty, but she was close. Fair skin, straight flowing blonde hair, almond eyes the color of emeralds; were it not for her larger carriage and oddly muscled shoulders, she could have been a female version of myself. I couldn't understand why an elven maiden would work in a place like this until she moved to lead a customer to his table; the swaying, bobbing walk answered my question even before she came out from behind the counter that had concealed her lower half.

Her equine half.

"She's beautiful," Gwyrnath breathed. I clenched my teeth until the muscles in my jaws ached for fear that I would lose myself and speak. Glancing over at Durag, I saw him looking at me with what could only be described as sadness. It must have disturbed him as much as it disturbed me.

"I need to go stretch my legs," I told him in a clipped voice. "I'll meet you at the jeep when you're finished eating." Without another word I got up and stalked out of the restaurant, leaving the smell and the stares and the half-breeds behind me.

The cramped, burning smell of people was less apparent outside. It wafted across my senses rather than forcing itself upon them, and if a gust of wind from someplace fresh caught me by surprise I could almost feel clean. I looked into a shop window; it was closed and dark, and I could see little but my own street-lit reflection. Even that was distorted, darkened by the back-lighting into little more than a silhouette with jagged slashes of light to mark the cheekbones.

The hunt was so simple, perhaps the only simple thing left in this world. The dragons threatened crops and people, so we went in and hunted them down. No moral ambiguity, no worries about the younger races trying to drag the elves down with them into barbarism. Just us and the beast, dancing the dance.

"I survived when the humans claimed mastery of the world through magic," I told the shadow in the window. "I survived when they lost their magic and the world slipped into war. I survived the new technology that drags the world along like a rushing mountain stream. I will survive this." I was an elf. We experience, we learn, and then we forget everything but the lesson.

And the lesson this time was that after this last hunt for Durag I was going to go back to my cabin and not come out until the world made sense again. Or until another of the younger races lost itself to extinction. The world could do with fewer complications.

THE NEXT DAY WAS SPENT DRIVING TO THE BASE OF THE MOUNtain. The hotel where we had stayed that night had been dingy and dank, leaving me with a headache; luckily Durag decided to spend most of the trip going over the hunting plan with Gwyrnath, so I was left out of the conversation almost entirely. It occurred to me that Durag might have done that on purpose, but I had never noticed his being that solicitous before. He was a dwarf, after all.

The plan was essentially the same as it had been for the six centuries I had been hunting. A dragon's two weaknesses were its sleeping cycle and its preference for caves. They slept about 19 hours of every day, which made it relatively easy to catch them before they awoke. As for caves, they restricted the dragon's movement, making its wings useless and giving it only one avenue of escape. This gave rise to the basic plan: Sneak in while the dragon was sleeping and then kill it before it got out of the cave.

Times had refined the plan somewhat, or at least the tools involved. My fine elven long bow had been replaced first by a crossbow, then a musket, then a hunting rifle, and finally by the assault rifle I carried now. The massive two-handed swords of the centaurs were now machine guns, shotguns, and various other artless implements of war. Where magi would hurl spells of devastation, a grenade or rocket launcher would serve. Everything was faster, smarter, and more efficient than it had been before. Perhaps that was one of the reasons I had retired.

It was all new to Gwyrnath, of course. Barely stuffed into the back seat, the centaur called out question after question about the fine art of dragon hunting. I could see the wonder in his face as Durag explained how the cunning dragon could hear a helicopter approach miles away, making it necessary for hunters to go in on foot even today. I guessed that even when some sort of silent flying machine had been invented, there would be people like Gwyrnath, people who would want to go in themselves, up close and personal with the beast.

I paid little attention after a while; some of Gwyrnath's questions provoked images I hadn't thought of in decades, memories I was happier to let fade. Which targets were best? What if the dragon tried to run? Did someone guard the entrance? He was going to be brave, and heroic, and self-sacrificing. Just like Zyrnia had been.

I could smell the leathery air, hear the roaring scrape of claws on stone as the beast lunged toward the entrance. Zyrnia's sword, gleaming wetly in the harsh light, was raised high as she stood proudly to block its escape. My throat tore as I screamed at her to run....

I shut my eyes and concentrated on the headache for the rest of the drive.

The rough trail ended late that afternoon, at the base of a mountain not quite large enough to have a name of its own. Durag, Gwyrnath, and I piled out of the jeep, shouldered travel packs, and started hiking. After the initial rocky hills the trail narrowed to just a few yards, forcing us to travel single file. That was fine with me, really; lines didn't promote communication, and I had been listening to the dwarf and the centaur all day. Instead, I spent the hike observing the scenery.

Durag had never thought of this tactic when trying to get me out here again, but I had missed the primitive, rugged terrain of the mountains. This particular peak was sharp and jagged, too young to have yet been blunted by weather and time. There was a sort of harsh beauty there, the overcast gray of the sky against the charcoal black of the rocks. I could even smell the rock, cool and strong and inviting. Dwarfs, for all their love of mountains, can never sense the stone as we can. Maybe it's because all they really want to do is mine it.

"You can feel the age here, can't you?" Durag called back to me at some point during the hike. "The solidity, the underlying order of it all." I merely smiled in response; there was no sense in making him feel inferior. Gwyrnath commented on the bracing mountain air, and the dwarf laughed loudly. I kept my eyes on the mountain and kept hiking.

We didn't make much progress that afternoon, just a few miles before the sun set. Durag found a spot on the trail that looked passable as a campsite and suggested we stop for the night. As I eased the pack off my aching shoulders I was struck again by the old memories. Perhaps it was the soreness of my shoulders; that sensation was familiar enough. In the vague shadowy grayness I could see the old campfires, smell the meat cooking, hear the coarse voices of the dwarfs, centaurs, humans. Old friends, most of them centuries dead by now.

I stretched the kinks out of my shoulders, concentrating on the pain to remind me exactly where I was. Most elves could do better. I had long worried that being around the lesser—younger, younger; it'd been centuries since we called them lesser—races for so long had dulled my mental skills; in fact, my withdrawal from society half a century ago was meant to correct that. Now, though, back out on the trail, I found the same memories clutching at my mind.

THE DRAGON MOVED THROUGH THAT CAVE LIKE DEATH,

"Could use a hand over here, elf."

"I'll be right there."

My childhood tutor had taught me that when illusions from the past clung too tightly, the only course of action was to leave. Once the experience was irrevocably tinged with shadows of former times, nothing valuable could be gained from it. But I had told Durag I would do this for him, and so cursing his callous dwarven insensitivity and the promises it forced, I turned back. Silently, the three of us set up camp.

Once our meal was prepared, though—their meal, rather; I took a few nutrabars rather than the game Durag caught—the silence was broken. There is something about a campfire that makes the younger races need to talk; perhaps they are afraid of silence and the introspection it provokes.

"This is going to make great stories to tell my friends next term," Gwyrnath said, staring into the orange and yellow light. "Me, a hunter. Just like in the old days."

"Bah!" Durag snorted. "Used a Gatling gun in the old days, or a musket, even."

"Or a bow and arrow and a mage's spell." I was hardly aware of having spoken until the words were out. Gwyrnath, face ruddy with firelight in contrast to his pale gray sweatshirt, looked at me in amazement.

"You were alive in the time of the magi?" he whispered.

"Not so long ago, for one of my kind," I said with a tolerant half-smile.

The centaur's face fell. "I forget sometimes," he said. "That elves and dwarfs live so long, I mean. I guess I sort of have to forget. It's just… I don't mind, really. I think my life will be full even if I don't see the century mark. More vigor, more drive." He sounded a little as if he were trying to convince himself. I looked away uncomfortably.

"The brighter the candle, the shorter the flame?" Durag asked. It sounded vaguely familiar. Some centaur philosopher, as if that wasn't an oxymoron. I thought back, trying to remember the name.

"Vyrial seems awfully cold comfort sometimes," Gwyrnath muttered. That was the name. I was a little surprised Durag knew him; I was only half-sure the dwarf could read at all.

"Wise man, he was," Durag said. "Can't find much comfort in the truth sometimes, but he did his best. Gave some new ideas, at the least."

"I guess so." I heard Gwyrnath stir himself, as if shaking his head. "Etherian, what was it like, living in the time of the magi?"

I hadn't expected the question, and floundered awkwardly for a moment before answering. "It was very human," I said slowly. "The humans had magi, which meant that they controlled almost everything. Spells fought the wars, spells kept the peace."

"No, I mean the hunt. What was it like back then?"

I stared into the flames, fighting to keep my head clear, but old sensations pushed themselves into my thoughts. Somewhere far away Durag was telling Gwyrnath that elves didn't like to talk about the past, but in front of me I could see only the memories.

"Our party was more than well known; we were famous, the best hunters the world had seen. A great wyrm had been stealing cattle from the farmsteads of a centaur village, and we pledged to kill the beast without payment."

"Noble," someone observed. I shook my head. At another campfire in another life I could see my old friends, faces unchanged through all the centuries past and perfectly called to mind.

"It wasn't nobility; we did it because the five of us thought we were unbeatable. Xantius, our mage, was the most powerful wizard known outside of legend. I was called Silvereye because of my skill with the bow, unmatched in all my travels. Bran, the other human, was as strong as a centaur and twice as fast. Gurod had once taken a claw full in the chest without falling, and Zyrnia used to use a sword a full seven feet long; she could twirl it like I would spin a dagger. We were heroes. Children of all races would come out to meet us as we entered a town, asking us to tell them how we slew dragons."

"It sounds like a fine life." I saw the parades again, bright and festive and full of cheerful worship, and could only nod in agreement.

"We tracked the dragon back to its lair, a cave in the midst of a thick forest. After a quick discussion we decided to go in as a group, taking down the wyrm all at once, like the heroes…" I almost tripped over the word. "Like the heroes we were. We didn't even check to make sure it was sleeping.

"The fight went badly. The dragon was a huge, roaring whirlwind, green like the forest and sinewy, like a snake with legs. It moved through that cave like death, faster than Bran's sword or Gurod's ax. We'd never met one nearly as powerful." The sooty blackness framed a vague, twisting shape. Bran, face lit red by the torch he held, shouted war cries that shattered echoes off the cavern wall. Metal and scales flashed crimson from all directions. "The dragon realized it was outmatched, and tried to flee, to take to the sky. Zyrnia… she was always the brave one, eager to prove the might of the centaurs, and she single-handedly blocked the entrance to the cave, forcing the beast back with flashing sweeps of her sword. Xantius raised one hand and shouted a phrase, and lightning snaked out, but somehow the dragon dodged, or Xantius missed, or… something."

"What do you mean?" In the part of my mind still sitting at the campfire, I hated whoever asked that, hated them for making me keep going through the memory that had been eating at my thoughts ever since Durag broke back into my life.

The image was a hundred times more vivid than a picture. The dragon, sinuous green coils rasping metallically, whipping around everywhere and nowhere at once. The spell, a white tendril tinged with red, arcing across the room and brilliantly framing everyone in black shadows. The smell of burned flesh and blood overlaying the alien smell of the lair. "She died almost instantly, I think, or at least she didn't have time to say anything. The dragon was outside in a heartbeat, tearing a gash across Bran's chest as it fled; I don't think he even felt it… he was just staring at Zyrnia, lying on her side with this expression... it wasn't pain so much as absurd surprise at the blackened hole in her breast."

"That's horrible." The voice was choked.

"That's not the worst part. Xantius, Gurod, and I ran out after the dragon, and outside we saw the reason Zyrnia had fought so heroically to keep the dragon inside. Some children from the village had followed us, to see the heroes…"

"The dragon?"

I could feel the smile, a bitter, ironic, almost hysterical grin, but couldn't stop it. "Oh, no. The dragon wanted nothing but to get away as fast as possible. Xantius's spell was so powerful, so finely wrought, that it ripped right through the centaur and…" Somewhere off to my right I heard a retching noise. "It was never quite the same after that, somehow. People didn't look up to us like they had before. We disbanded less than a year later, and I never saw any of them again."

The memory faded, content at having ripped through my soul like Xantius's lightning. I looked across the campfire at the two. Durag's beady eyes were sad again, as if in his dwarf way he was trying to understand what I had gone through. Gwyrnath looked sick. "All that power," I mused, brushing a wayward spark away. "All he could do was kill Zyrnia. It makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"And you stayed?" Gwyrnath asked in a strangled voice. "You kept hunting, after that?"

"We experience, and then we move on," I said. The centaur looked away, shaking his head in confusion or denial. Durag wiped his eyes, probably because of the smoke, and went about clearing the plates. "Let's get some rest," I suggested. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

FASTER THAN BRAN'S SWORD,

WE GOT UP AT MORNING LIGHT, AND CONTINUED OUR HIKE UP THE mountain. According to Durag's estimate, if we kept a good pace we would be outside the dragon's lair in the late afternoon. The dwarf led, booted feet clacking on the stone path as he set the pace. I took the middle, and Gwyrnath brought up the rear, carrying a much larger pack than Durag or me. Say what you would about them, centaurs were excellent when it came to manual labor.

"Etherian, I was thinking last night," Gwyrnath's voice boomed up from behind me.

I checked a sarcastic rejoinder. "What were you thinking about?"

"Humans. You talked about how powerful magic was and everything, but what happened to them? Why did they fall to extinction?"

"What do public schools teach you people these days?" I muttered back irritably. It wasn't really my fault; it was the first time in decades that I had slept on the ground.

"I know what the schools say, but you were there. Why did the magic disappear?"

"The only ones who knew that were the magi, and they're long dead," I answered. "The history books say that the magical energy was like a natural resource only humans could tap, and eventually it just ran out. If you ask me, though, the humans should have seen it coming. The magi were tapping into more and more arcane energy—sources no one with fear for their soul ought to touch. One day one of them transgressed where he shouldn't have, and all magi paid the price for his sins." I glanced back at Gwyrnath, who was looking at me wide-eyed. "Or at least that's what it pointed to."

"You think… well, even if they did lose their magic, why did they die out? Not all of them were magi, were they?"

"True, but without the magic—Why all this interest in humans, Gwyrnath?"

"The university is changing its internal organization. Starting in the fall, Human Studies won't be a major, just a minor under History."

"Probably for the best. As to their extinction, here's what happened. After they lost the magic, the whole power dynamic of the world changed—magic was no longer the tool of power. The wars that followed wiped out a good deal of humanity; the humans just weren't used to fighting without spells. And after those wars ended, the remaining humans just couldn't compete. Not as strong as your kind, not as sturdy as the dwarfs, not as long-lived as us… there just weren't any positions where they could excel. They didn't have a niche."

"But even so, couldn't the governments have done something? Offered them special jobs, or helped them out until they could get back on their feet?"

"Sure, that's a great idea, until they start taking away jobs that centaurs wanted, and could have done better. Or until that science research position goes to a human instead of a more qualified dwarf, because the powers that be want to promote equality." I turned a corner and paused for a moment, staring at the mid-morning sky. It was still gray and overcast, but it didn't look like rain. "Gwyrnath, your idea would create a permanent underclass, a race of mendicants. Looking at it that way, wasn't it more humane to just let them die out by themselves?" Or with help, in some cases; kicking an opponent while he was on the ground was an important part of the dwarven and centauran societies. Only the elves had the patience to let time accomplish its work without the intervention of brutality.

"I don't know," Gwyrnath said from behind me. "It's just… I would have liked to see the humans, the magic."

"If the humans were still here, with their magic, nothing would be the way it is now." I gestured ahead, toward Durag. "No one would have studied technology, because magic would have been there. The jeep we drove up in, the clothes you're wearing, that all comes from the extinction of the humans. Centaurs, dwarfs… you'd still be second-class citizens behind the humans."

"That's not true!"

I sighed. "We're going to kill the dragon, right?"

I could almost hear Gwyrnath's mind trying to fit the two ideas together. "Yes."

"Now, when you think about it, the dragons are pretty beautiful, aren't they? Enormous but graceful, dancing through the sky like a silk ribbon caught in a breeze. Proud, majestic—it'll be almost a shame when they're gone for good."

Now he got it. "Oh."

I kept going, though, to hammer the point in. "But the sad fact is that dragons and the rest of us can't exist in the same world. They ravage the countryside, attack campers… we don't really have a choice; we have to get rid of them. And while we might remember them fondly, we never forget that the world is a better place without them."

For a long moment there was only silence behind me. Finally Gwyrnath said, "I guess after all those centuries you elves get pretty good at putting things in a perspective that lets you sleep at night."

I didn't respond. I had heard worse from the lesser races. Silently the two of us trudged behind Durag toward the dragon's lair.

It was a few hours before sunset when the cave came into view, a jagged black stain on the charcoal gray of the mountainside. Durag called a halt with an upraised hand, then turned to me wordlessly. I nodded, stepped past him carefully so as not to make any noise, and crept toward the cave on my own.

After the disaster at the cave, I had made it an ironclad rule that someone check the cave beforehand to make sure that the dragon was sleeping. If we had done it back then, Zyrnia… Absolute silence required absolute concentration. I cleared my mind except for the thought of placing one foot in front of the other.

The edge of the cave was just a few feet away. I stopped, closed my eyes, held my breath, and listened as only an elf can.

The wind scraped against the mountainside, against me, whistled into the cave itself. Two miles away an eagle cried out. A hundred yards above me a small rodent dislodged a pebble from where it had lain. Durag and Gwyrnath's breathing was like a blast furnace from where they waited. And inside the cave, echoed a thousand times by the cavern walls, a gargantuan creature breathed the deep, regular breaths of sleep. I opened my eyes and raised one hand.

My other hand slowly unhooked the assault rifle from its clip at my waist. The safety was already off. Durag and Gwyrnath would begin advancing shortly; for all their attempts, they would be as loud as if they drove up in the jeep. Because of that, someone had to go inside first, and cover the dragon in case it woke up. Someone fast, silent, competent. I let out the breath I had been holding, took a long last look at the assault rifle in my hands, and slipped forward into the cave.

This being the east side of the mountain, the cave didn't get much sun this time of day. After a few steps I was in complete and utter darkness. I stopped again, tried to relax, and gradually let my pupils dilate. Elvensight, the other reason I acted as point-man. The pitch blackness resolved itself into walls, random outcroppings of stone, and up ahead, in the middle of what I guessed to be a massive cavern… there.

It was a good-sized beast, the largest I had seen in a while. Its body shape was almost feline, albeit with wings and a long, serpentine neck. I judged it to be a little more than a hundred feet long, not counting the tail, but from its position it was difficult to tell for certain; it was curled up like a sleeping cat, chin resting atop the tail and wings folding protectively over most of the back.

Elvensight didn't give me color perception, but only the Northern Red slept in that position; it had something to do with the joints in the back. The spikey ridges running down the length of the backbone indicated a Red as well. I thanked luck that it wasn't green, then cursed myself for a weak-minded fool. Durag and Gwyrnath would be advancing now, and here I was studying the beast! I tried to guess

ITS BODY SHAPE WAS FELINE

how long I had been standing idly, swore under my breath, and stepped quickly forward, assault rifle coming up to train on the dragon's head.

Something clicked, loudly.

Maybe it had been my haste in moving forward, an act that flew in the face of all the elven patience I had learned in my seven centuries of life. More likely it was inferior workmanship in the equipment belt Durag had given me. Whatever it was, as soon as the echoes had finished reverberating in my head, I knew that it was too loud.

The deep, rhythmic breathing broke off.

"DURAG!" I screamed, and as glowing scarlet eyes the size of my head snapped open, I emptied half my clip into the wyrm's face.

The beast roared, the sound of a jet engine gifted with menace; the mere noise knocked me backward. I screamed again, wordlessly this time, and kept firing at its head. Its vast bulk whipped upright, claws scraping deep gouges into the stone floor, and I heard the massive lungs draw in an enormous breath.

With every ounce of strength I could gather I leaped forward and to my right, deeper into the dragon's cavern. A moment later the darkness exploded into light as a wave of flaring yellow fire ripped through the spot where I had stood. The brilliance destroyed my elvensight; I kept moving, scrambling blindly toward the back of the cavern, and prayed that the dragon's night vision was gone as well, from its own flame or my bullets. I could hear it moving, stone screeching in protest as claws tore through it in haste.

Light exploded again, this time the shining white of an electric torch, and a moment later gunfire tore into the cavern. Durag, I realized with an almost absurd thankfulness. My view was blocked by the dragon—I was almost behind it now—but the explosions of a shotgun and some sort of automatic weapon made the beast scream in pain.

From six hundred years of experience I knew what the dragon would try to do. Even before it inhaled I shouted out a warning to my partners and fired half-blind at the back of its head, trying to distract it before it could cut loose with another blast of flame.

There was a sickening crunch and an explosion of red and orange as the dragon's right wing was ripped away at the socket. The beast reared back, head crashing against the ceiling and flames spewing harmlessly against a wall as it bellowed in agony. Lightning? A grenade launcher, I realized vaguely; one of Durag's new weapons.

The dragon lurched backward, and its tail caught me across the chest with enough force to send me crashing into one of the walls. My gun skittered away from me, and I lay there, gasping and trying to recover my breath, utterly helpless.

Another crunch of exploding flesh, another hail of machine gun bullets. The dragon screamed again. I remembered the handgun Durag had given me as a backup, tucked into a holster on my belt, and fumbled for it gracelessly, still trying to breathe. I found it after a long moment, flicked off the safety, and began firing blindly at the creature's back. Anything was better than lying there helpless, waiting for the dwarf and the new boy to rescue me.

Claws raked stone again, and the dragon lunged forward. I heard someone shout, and then the dragon was fleeing its cavern, leaping out from the mountainside to fly away.

And with only one wing left, it plummeted out of view almost instantly. Nothing, not even the grandsire of all dragons, could survive a fall like that.

It was over.

I sank back against the cavern wall and tried to remember how to breathe.

AFTER A SHORT ETERNITY, I REALIZED THAT DURAG AND GWYRNATH weren't going to help me up, and I opened my eyes. The cavern was almost empty, save for a few bones the beast hadn't discarded yet. Even so, I almost missed them, two crumpled forms lying at opposite sides of the cavern's entrance. I guessed that they had been knocked aside when the dragon fled. After getting slowly to my feet, I made my way over to them.

"Fine, I am. Don't need any help." Durag shook his head and pushed himself to his knees. The tubular device I guessed to be the grenade launcher was nothing more than a few fragments of twisted metal, but the dwarf seemed no worse than usual. "Got a good kick, that one does. Gwyrnath, lad! How are you?"

I looked over to see the centaur climbing back to his feet with a clatter of hooves. He looked over at me, and smiled the grandest smile I had ever seen; it was an exultant grin at life, a newfound joy I had lost centuries ago.

And then the centaur collapsed.

I was by his side in an instant. "What is it?" My eyes, still blurry from the dragon's flame, raked across his body, looking for any wound or break.

There. Just an inch or two under the Hyrnan University Polo logo, a small hole, hardly worth noticing. The stain of blood was hardly an inch or two across. I cursed.

"Lad! Gwyrnath!" The dwarf's voice was closer to breaking than I had ever heard it. He took the centaur's shoulder.

"Didn't feel a thing," Gwyrnath whispered. "What a story… next term… friends…." Twice more his chest rose and fell, and then, with a little gurgle, Gwyrnath died.

"Bullet pierced his lung," I said, and turned away. "Somebody's ricochet, most likely." Somebody's. Only it wasn't Durag's grenade launcher, and what were the odds of Gwyrnath accidentally hitting himself with one of his own shots? But elves never miss; we're legendary for our accuracy, so the only possible explanation was that Gwyrnath had accidenly shot himself. What a stupid mistake, even for a centaur.

That he, alive and vibrant and happy and perfectly fitting with this strange new world, was dead, while I, who couldn't leave my cabin for more than a few days at a time, was alive… I shook my head. A valuable lesson in irony, and I would remember the lesson as soon as I could forget the experience itself.

"All this power—" the dwarf whispered, using my words. He closed the centaur's eyes and turned to me. "Did you ever read Calinus?"

"I think so," I answered numbly. "He was the human who made the lightning spell. Won awards for it, I think."

Durag nodded. "In his speech," he rumbled quietly, "he tells the other magi that he hopes the lightning spell will create peace in the world. He thinks the races will be so afraid of what destruction magic could cause that they never do violence again."

My friend, my dirty, unwashed, barely literate dwarven friend, quoted ancient humans. I almost had to laugh in the middle of that dead cavern. "Didn't the dwarven inventor Gaborg say the same thing when he created gunpowder?"

"I never quote that one," Durag stated matter-of-factly. I turned around to see him looking at Gwyrnath's machine gun. "It seemed naive when he said it." He bent as if to pick up the weapon, then left it where it lay.

According to ancient custom, those who die hunting dragons are left where they lay. Durag and I looked at Gwyrnath's body for a long moment, and then we turned and left the cavern. Outside somewhere a bird called. It was time for me to go back to my cabin.

ALBEIT WITH WINGS AND A LONG, SERPENTINE NECK

Bitter Chivalry

When curses mingle with desires,
it can take an eternity to untangle
the knot they weave.

Driven as he was by the persistence of his dreams, Sir Hormisdas sought an audience with King Arthur. It was in that doleful time after the knights had gone to seek the Holy Grail, after the celebrated Pentecost feast at which the apparition of the Grail had appeared before the assembled company, and the air was filled with such sweetness as could not be described, and each man found on his plate the succulent meat he most desired.

On that occasion, King Arthur wept, for he knew that he would never again see these knights alive together and feasting, for most of them were proud and sinful men and would perish on the quest.

So it was, as the summer passed, and the autumn faded into winter, that reports trickled back, of individual despair, of death, and of failure.

BY DARRELL SCHWEITZER
Illustration by Todd Lockwood

All this Hormisdas knew only as hearsay, for he had missed everything, lying sick abed in a tower.

The knights were gone, leaving the King alone.

Sir Hormisdas, the son of a converted Moor called Mascezel, lay feverish for months, dreaming his dreams.

And when Hormisdas had recovered well enough to walk, his wounds mended, and the poison passed out of his body, he hobbled into the great feasting hall of Camelot on a crutch and found the King there one evening, without even a servant to wait upon him.

Hormisdas came because of what his dreams portended. He came because he desired a quest, set upon him by Arthur, whereby he could gain great worship. He came because it had so long been whispered that the son of a pagan had no business sitting at the Round Table.

Now the table was empty and Arthur sat by himself in the darkened hall. He looked up as Hormisdas entered.

"You are the last," said the King.

Hormisdas put his crutch aside, caught hold of the table's edge, and tried to kneel. Although he was but a youth of 19 winters, his knees were stiff as those of an old man.

"Your pardon, Lord —"

The King motioned for him to sit. "What use are these formalities between the two of us?"

"Lord, I meant only —"

"To express fealty? To acknowledge my rank?"

"Yes. Of course."

"We're all the same when naked and in the earth. Therefore sit, Hormisdas."

Painfully, the young man sat.

"Would you leave me also," said Arthur slowly, "whom I have loved as much as any other of my knights?"

The King poured himself a cup of wine and then filled another, offering it to Hormisdas, who took it and sipped.

"Lord, I have dreamed dreams."

"So do all men. It is even more to be expected when you were ill. It took the leeches weeks to draw out the poison —"

"Great King, I know that *these* dreams have meaning, that a quest is upon me, that it comes from God, and I must go, to win fame and worship —" Then Hormisdas choked on his own words, shocked that he'd dared to interrupt King Arthur, but the King only smiled a little and put him at his ease. Yet there was more sadness than mirth in that smile, and for all he pretended ease, the King seemed overtaken by some great sorrow, and even Hormisdas, who had been far away from everything in his tower, feared that the King's mind was darkened with suspicions of Guinevere.

Neither said anything. Rain dripped through the leaking roofs of Camelot. Somewhere, a dog barked.

Then the King spoke. "I think you should be satisfied with the reputation you have, Hormisdas. When I sent you against the White Dragon of the Sea, your deeds were worthy of song and story, and for them I made you a knight. You summoned the monster with the enchanted horn as was prescribed, then lopped the beast's head off as neatly as if it were a piece of cheese —"

Now Hormisdas wept, and his words burst forth in a torrent, interrupting, with no regard for propriety or rank or consequences. "Lord, your words torment me, as a cat does a wounded mouse. My mission, if you can call it that… it was a disaster. I came back on my shield, carried by a couple of ploughmen. Nobody's going to put that in a song!"

Arthur reached out and took the young man's hand in his own, to comfort him, as a father would a child, and within his mind Hormisdas raged at being treated like a child, but the King's voice and touch calmed him.

"Hormisdas, at the moment you killed the monster, you gloried in being a knight, did you not? You felt the sweetness of chivalry."

"But then the tail twitched and broke both my legs, and I fell into a pool of the dragon's blood and was poisoned."

"Thus God humbles the proud. I tell you, Hormisdas, that chivalry is bitter more often than it is sweet."

But Hormisdas would not be dissuaded. He wanted to redeem himself, not merely in the eyes of others but in his own eyes, for Hormisdas was dubbed a knight while lying delirious on a shield and didn't even find out that he *was* a knight until regaining his senses weeks later, a man who could barely walk and certainly would never ride in a tourney again—such a man was at best half a knight and hardly a hero of worship. Therefore he told King Arthur of his dream, which came to him every time he slept, of a lady of white stone weeping bloody tears over a slain knight, and a stone knight weeping over a lady.

Rain dripped through the leaking roofs of Camelot. Somewhere, a dog barked.

"You're dreaming of the grave, Hormisdas. Don't rush into it."

Still Sir Hormisdas insisted that this was a quest from God, and demanded to be sent forth.

"I'm confused," said the King, smiling again, "I thought it was I who should command —"

"Lord, please, I beg you —"

Despite the pain this time, Hormisdas actually dropped to his knees. He trembled, and clung to the edge of the table.

And seeing there was no help for it, King Arthur sighed. He touched the youth on the head and gave his blessing, then bent down to whisper: "This then is the quest I give you, Sir Hormisdas. It comes from God, through me, and therefore is a true quest. *Comfort someone.* You don't have to slay any monsters, knock over giants, or recover any treasure. Just give comfort, and remember that oftimes what seems a small task can be a very great one. Accept this quest. Swear an oath on it, before God, as you are a knight."

Although he did not understand, Sir Hormisdas swore.

Then the King helped him to his feet and left him, and the young knight's mind was filled with anger and pain and confusion, and it seemed that the King's receding footsteps and the dripping rain conspired to mock him; that this quest was a joke, that even God was laughing. This wasn't bitter chivalry, but no chivalry at all.

"*Comfort* someone?" he said to the darkness.

No echo replied.

Therefore, in the darkness, amid the cruel rains of winter, Sir Hormisdas set out on his quest alone. He couldn't afford a squire. Besides, he was ashamed, and stole away on an old horse from the stables like a thief in the night, with his shield slung on one side of his saddle and his crutch on the other, and he bitterly rehearsed how minstrels would one day sing the heroic songs of the Knight of the Crutch, who went forth merely to comfort, to say a nice word; and he shivered in his ill-kept armor and clung precariously to his saddle, and wept and laughed bitterly indeed.

He almost fell more than once. He couldn't get his feet into the stirrups. His right leg in particular could not grasp the horse's flank. Under the circumstances a lance would be useless. If he charged anything, he'd go flying off the horse's rump, which is hardly what a knight is supposed to do.

Hardly a knight then, without a lance or pennons flying, he set forth.

Son of a pagan, he tried to think on God, to be thankful for this quest.

But he could only remember the stories Mascezel had told him of the warm lands of Africa; and the thought came to him that maybe it had been a mistake for his father Mascezel to have become a Chris-

tian at all, and the two of them would have been much happier sitting under a palm tree watching the Sun rise over the blue sand, which was like a sea—

He stuttered a prayer through chattering teeth, recognizing temptation, from Satan. The pain in his legs chastised him.

He thought on tales of knighthood, and famous deeds.

The cold settled within him, and once more he was feverish.

Half delirious, then, he found knightly adventures. He came among robbers, and rushed toward them, his sword whirling over his head. The robbers laughed and scattered like magpies. One of them toppled him from his saddle with the swipe of a staff, then all stood over him as he lay on his back in the mud and the rain. But Hormisdas called on their honor, and challenged the whole robber company, saying he would fight them all at once if only he could sit on a log with his back against a tree.

The robbers, thinking this novel sport, agreed. Hormisdas slew them all, braining the last one with his crutch.

He found a long-dead knight lying in a ditch and buried him, and tried to give comfort, but the man's ghost would not rest, and hovered above the grave, shrieking.

Before him, a hillside burst asunder like rotten fruit, and an avalanche of black, writhing worms poured down upon him, stinging his horse to death. But they could not pierce his armor and, alternately praying and cursing, he slew them with his sword or trampled them underfoot, all throughout a dreary, wet afternoon, until night came and he wasn't sure he'd gotten them all and ceased to care.

He felt no sense of glory.

He passed through a forest haunted by harpies, leaning on his crutch, hiding his face with his shield, unable to shut out the voices of the harpies as they called on him to curse God and die.

When a naked Queen of Lust rose steaming out of the suddenly parted earth, he was fortified by his pain and rage and merely turned away into the storm once more.

He thought it likely he would perish in the wilderness, but he did not curse God, and he did not perish, and in the darkness, as the ground froze and the rain became blinding snow, he conversed with wolves and owls and adders, but did not turn from his quest.

Waking, he dreamed of the stone knight and the stone lady.

He tried to grapple with the idea of the quest in his mind. Whom was he supposed to comfort? He could get no further than that.

In such a condition, his crutch sliding precariously on the ice, he tried to cross a stone bridge, when a voice called out, "Will you fight with me, Sir Knight?"

He had to shake his head to clear his vision, and only gradually made out a knight standing in the middle of the bridge, clad all in tarnished silver armor, snow gathered on his shoulders like a cloak, a drawn sword in his hand the color of bone.

"I ask again, will you fight with me?" The other's voice thundered from behind a visor like the face of a ravenous beast. The eyes were like black pits.

Hormisdas, in his fever and pain and weariness, could barely reply. His words came out all in a jumble. "Why should I bother? You're not my enemy. I have no money. If there's a toll, I'll go around. I have the authority of King Arthur. A quest. I will not curse God and die, though it seems a good idea sometimes. In my dream, the lady of stone weeps—"

And the other said something as astonishing as if one of the bridge stones had spoken it.

"I know how you feel. I too am a knight of the Round Table."

Why this was particularly astonishing, Sir Hormisdas could not immediately sort out. Here was a brother knight. They could perhaps become companions on the road, on the quest, and grow toward God through valor and purity and find the Holy Grail. That was what everyone was doing, wasn't it? The countryside should be thick with knights seeking the Holy Grail, and with holy hermits directing them or tending their wounds, and with magical maidens and with enchanters presenting snares and dangers to be overcome by the hero whose heart was pure and whose mind was clear—

But his own quest wasn't working out like that. Nor was this other man's. That was why King Arthur wept when the Grail appeared at Pentecost, because he knew that it would be thus.

"Your pardon," said Hormisdas. "I don't recognize your voice. But tell me your name and raise your visor, and I will know you."

"I cannot tell you my name, lest it be remembered and perpetuate my disgrace," said the knight, "nor can I show you my face, for it would sicken you to look on it. I am a leper."

Hormisdas drew back and crossed himself, but the Leper Knight bade him sit by the fire in a rude enclosure he had made, which was little more than a mass of sticks woven together, and the fire was small, but still Hormisdas was grateful.

The Leper Knight offered him some broth, but Hormisdas was hesitant.

"No," said the other. "My contagion is of the soul, not in the soup. Therefore drink."

Hormisdas drank. The broth seemed to drive the cold out of his throat a little and to clear his head.

"Why did you want to fight me?"

"Because I cursed God, and God cursed me in return." And the Leper Knight told how he had strayed from the quest of the Grail and wronged a lady in the castle just beyond the bridge, and been punished, first by leprosy, then by the understanding that he could only be made clean in death, and he could die only when overthrown by a champion stronger than himself, and only redeemed if he died giving humble thanks to God, an unlikely sentiment for a knight at the instant he is defeated in combat.

And Hormisdas tried to give comfort, reminiscing about the summer days in Camelot and of the tourneys there. But the Leper Knight only wept, saying that he would never behold such splendors again.

"I had thought you might be my rescuer," he said. He took Hormisdas's crutch in his hand and examined it closely, as if it were a finely wrought weapon, and gave it back.

"I am no better than you," said Hormisdas. "I will never ride at Camelot again. My legs haven't healed right."

"At least you can move in the company of men as one of them." The Leper Knight removed one of his gloves, and the flesh of his hand was blue-black and hideous to behold. Even in the frigid air, the stench was terrible.

They looked at one another, each expecting the other to utter some final words of despair and defeat, but neither did.

Almost absurdly, for both of them, there was a little hope left.

Sir Hormisdas took comfort, and perhaps he gave some, but it was not the end of his quest. Instead of a holy hermit to guide him, he had the Leper Knight. It was his task to riddle out the meaning on the adventure. Meanwhile, he and the other spoke for a while longer of Camelot, and more than once some chance remark almost revealed the Leper Knight's identity, but recognition always darted away at the last instant, like a hart evading the hunters. Hormisdas longed to reach out and raise the other man's visor, perhaps when the Leper Knight slept; but that would be a cruelty, he knew, a regression from the path of his quest, and he did not.

Besides, it was part of the curse that the Leper Knight never slept, for in sleep he might escape his pain, and there was no escaping it.

Again Hormisdas took some comfort when the other said, "Yes, I knew you at Camelot. Some of the others said no half-Moor belonged there, but certainly your battle against the White Dragon was something a knight could be proud of—"

And somehow Hormisdas knew the other was not mocking him. Still he said, "God humbles the proud. Chivalry is more often bitter than sweet."

The Leper Knight replied, "You are wiser than I, despite fewer years."

Thus, again, Hormisdas was comforted and gave comfort, though not enough to complete his quest. But his mind was cleared and for once he knew the direction he must go in the morning. For now, the

warmth of the fire and the broth made him sleep, and he slept, the Leper Knight embracing him like a brother, to keep away the cold; and Sir Hormisdas dreamed of gray stones.

The morrow was as dark as the night, for the storm grew ever more great, as if the world would end. Hormisdas stirred. The Leper Knight helped him to his feet.

"I will pray for you," said the youth.

"And I for you," said the Leper Knight.

They parted. Prodding the snow with his crutch, leaning into the wind, Hormisdas crossed the bridge. For an instant it seemed that fires rose up from either side, sheets of heatless white flame, dazzling to the eye. Then there were dragon heads, floating there in the white light and swirling snow, saying, "What fool is this? What hero? What fool?"

But Hormisdas did not speak to them, nor did he turn aside, and he crossed the bridge safely, only to wander again aimlessly amid snowfields, unable to tell where Earth and sky conjoined. Voices spoke to him out of the wind, mocking him, bidding him despair, curse God, and die.

Hormisdas thought of Job on his dungheap, likewise bidden, but he did not dare compare himself to that holy man.

In one preposterous, prideful moment, he thought he saw a light in front of him, as if the Holy Grail now appeared like a distant star to lead him on. But he knew he hadn't done enough. He wasn't worthy. He wasn't even *looking* for the Grail, and his mind fell into a tangle, trying to figure out how a holy man could really be holy, because he must know it, and if he knew it, he'd be guilty of pride, and if he denied it he'd be lying. To find the Grail, or salvation, one had to seek without seeking, do *nothing* steadfastly, oblivious, sleepwalking into Paradise—

Then there *was* a light in front of him, streaming from the window of a tower. He came to a castle so shrouded in snow that it seemed hardly other than a part of the natural landscape, not a man-built thing at all. By some trick of the wind and the failing light, the snow swirled to form battlements, roofs, and towers.

Yet he hobbled in through the unguarded gate, and the stones were solid enough. He came into a hall, where a low fire smoldered on the hearth. And he heard the sound of weeping, and followed it, often led astray by the wind and by echoes, but he came at last to a tomb in a crypt beneath the castle where a huge knight clad in armor the color of rust knelt in prayer before a tomb, whereon was formed, in perfect, exquisite, white stone, the image of the lady Hormisdas had seen so often in his dreams.

The knight turned, metal creaking.

Sir Hormisdas spoke, trying to give comfort. But the other leaped to his feet, snatching up mace and shield. His shield was the color of dried blood, his mace that of the reddish Sun, setting amid storm clouds. His visor seemed formed out of old, dead, brown leaves, yet it was somehow like a living face, filled with rage.

The other struck at Sir Hormisdas, who cried, "Why are you doing this?" and "I'm not your enemy," and "I'm only half a knight so there's no glory in this."

But the other struck again, saying, "I don't care about glory and all men are my enemies."

Hormisdas braced himself behind his shield against a pillar and defended himself as best he could.

"I don't care about glory anymore either—"

"All men have wronged my lady, or could have wronged her, or would wrong her if they had the chance; therefore I must avenge her."

"This is madness, Sir —"

"Then say that I am mad, and die."

Yet Hormisdas did not die, for he had his quest before him, and the fury of righteousness came into him, righteousness without pride. He thought of God, and of King Arthur, and of how the Leper Knight had strayed and been punished, how he himself had been humbled, and suddenly the tangle of how the holy man—or holy knight—can admit his own holiness without committing further sin seemed a childish riddle, not so much easily explicated as ignored. It didn't matter. Hormisdas fought on, with a new strength. Even the pain in his legs aided him, driving him into a frenzy. The castle echoed with the hammering of metal on metal, with the cries of the two combatants.

They fought all through the day, and as night fell, and darkness filled the crypt utterly, it was the stranger knight who fell. His helmet rolled rattling across the stone floor. Hormisdas caught him by the hair and held him firm, and the Knight said, "Now, what will you do?"

And Hormisdas, thinking how he had been tested once before by the White Dragon of the Sea, struck off the stranger knight's head as if it were a piece of cheese.

It was only after he had struck that Sir Hormisdas realized his error. To slay one's enemy after a desperate combat—that was what any knight would do. That was the sort of thing that got recorded in story and song.

But he had given no comfort.

It did not serve his quest.

He heard stone grinding, and turned, amazed, to see the lady's tomb open. She who was within, that same lady whose image had been carven, now emerged. She beheld Hormisdas holding the head of the fallen knight, and at this sight she wept, yet showed no anger toward Hormisdas, nor did she call him "murderer." Instead, she knelt where the knight had fallen, and washed her hands in his blood, and took the head gently out of the slayer's unresisting hands, and kissed the dead lips.

"It is my doom," said she, "never to behold my beloved Gerhadras alive, nor can he ever behold me."

"Indeed," said Hormisdas, unable to say anything more, for he did not wish to cause the lady further pain.

"But when I am dead, he is alive, and when he is dead, I am alive. That is our sore trial. You have raised me up by what you have done, but you have not rescued me, nor do I take any comfort from living thus."

"I had hoped to give comfort," said Hormisdas, feeling ashamed, like a child who has made a mess and can't hide it.

"You have merely blundered."

"What can I do otherwise?"

"Perhaps nothing," said the lady, but then she bade him lift up the body of the slain Sir Gerhadras while she bore his head. She led him to another tomb alongside her own, whereon was carven the image of a knight in repose, and Hormisdas knew that this was the man he had slain, and that the tomb was the one he had known for so long from his dreams. He placed the corpse within and closed the stone slab over it.

For a long time, the lady knelt by the tomb, praying and weeping.

Hormisdas offered her first sympathy, then sweet words, saying that she was far too beautiful a lady for her charms to be wasted here at the tomb. Better to come away with him, to Camelot, at least, or even to the warm lands of Africa.

But she said to him bitterly, "I would rather lie with a stone than with any other than Gerhadras."

And Hormisdas was ashamed and knelt beside her, and prayed for God's forgiveness that in just a moment he had strayed from his quest.

Eventually the lady rose up and emerged from the crypt. She sat in the feasting hall of the castle while Sir Hormisdas waited on her, and she ate, and for a time seemed almost merry. She said that her name was Amarylla. She spoke to the blessed time when she had dwelt in this place amid many servants, alongside her lover and lord, Gerhadras, before a rogue knight, someone who claimed to be on a quest from King Arthur but obviously had much else on his mind, arrived, slew Sir Gerhadras by treachery, and claimed the hand of the lady in marriage.

She demanded of him time to weave a shroud for her lover's tomb before she would consent, saying, "If you are a knight, sir, you will grant a lady this favor."

So he granted it, and she began her work, each night speaking to the image of Gerhadras on the shroud as if he were still alive, telling him that he must avenge her.

It was dark magic she worked, not from God at all. And she never finished the shroud, always pulling a few threads away from the edges, so that it would not be complete.

At last the rogue knight would wait no longer, and he took her by force and had his way with her. Only as she lay bleeding at his feet did he chance to look at the shroud, whereon was depicted the resurrected Gerhadras, her avenger, and the wicked knight himself, cast down by him.

Then Gerhadras emerged from out of the shroud and smote the rogue knight, who did not die of his wound, but instead putrefied while still alive, and became a leper.

Yet this was not the end, for the Lady Amarylla became great with child by her ravisher. She sought to end the life of the child within her by poison, but it was a judgment of God that the poison instead reduced her to a state like death, and further, that she could be cleansed and raised up only when her lover was dead, that she might mourn for him, and that he could only rise again when she was dead, that he might avenge her.

"There is no ending, then," said Lady Amarylla to Sir Hormisdas, as she finished her tale. "We two swing back and forth, out of life into death, out of death into life, like a pair of pendulums, out of time with one another. Therefore, though I seem to take nourishment from the meal you have served me, though I seem to rest and rise and wash myself and go though all the actions of life, I yearn for my tomb, that my beloved Gerhadras might be restored."

"But he takes no comfort from this either," said Hormisdas.

"It is the judgment of God, for our sins."

"What can I do to lessen your pain?"

"Nothing," said the lady, "nor can any man comfort me."

But Hormisdas refused to believe that. He knew, now, that this was the fulfillment of his quest, that, indeed, as Arthur had told him, the small task of comfort was a very great labor indeed.

Far easier to slay a dozen monsters or overthrow a thousand champions.

He tried to speak to the lady, but she heard him not. He played merry music. He waited on her. He served her.

But days passed and she wasted away, growing ever more pale, ever more feeble, until she could not rise from her bed.

At the very end, she bade him lift her up, and place her within her tomb, and to pray for her.

He did so, and there she died, weeping for her lost lover and her lost purity, and he placed the marble slab over her.

He began to weep also, but then heard stone grinding on stone, and a metal-shod footstep, and a thunderous voice, saying, "Recreant, I alone may shed such tears. Do not steal my sorrow. It's all I have left."

Hormisdas turned and beheld Sir Gerhadras in his armor, with his visor lowered over his face, his shield and mace upraised.

Then Gerhadras emerged from out of the shroud and smote the rogue knight...

Again the two of them fought. Sir Gerhadras's pain drove him, likewise, into a frenzy, and he could do naught else; and the castle rang with the sound of their combat, and the two of them streamed with blood from many wounds.

They rested on their shields. Hormisdas grew so weary that he leaned once more on his crutch.

"We don't have to do this," he said. "Let us stop, pray together, and find a resolution."

"I know of none. There *is* none. I cannot stop," said Gerhadras.

And they fought, and even though Hormisdas now leaned on his crutch, Gerhadras never overthrew him. Perhaps the *act* of fighting was what he needed, not the victory; perhaps the grace of God preserved Hormisdas on his quest because he had not cursed and had not despaired.

And again, it was Sir Gerhadras who fell, and he looked up at Hormisdas with the utmost wretchedness in his eyes and cried out, "You know what you have to do if you want to comfort me!"

And Hormisdas struck off his head as if it were cheese, and laid him once more in his tomb, while the Lady Amarylla wept and washed her hands in his blood.

Again he waited on the lady and tried to cheer her. He said, at the very end, "But lie with me and be comforted," and though he had no sinful intention, she replied, "I would rather lie with a stone."

"I will no more hurt you than a stone," he said.

She died in his arms, weeping for Sir Gerhadras.

It was at that moment that he looked on the tapestry she had woven, and noticed in it, near the edge where the threads were unraveled each night, his own image, holding the dead corpse in his arms; and above was the risen Moon.

He went to the window, opened the shutters, and beheld the bright Moon, gleaming over the snowfields.

Then Sir Gerhadras rose up and fought with him, and would not be reasoned with, or comforted; and always Gerhadras held back from the victory when he could have had it, and at sunrise, Hormisdas slew him.

And the lady rose, and sorrowed, and died.

And he fought with Gerhadras yet again.

The three of them now swung through life and death, like pendulums out of time with one another.

Hormisdas got no rest and no relief from his pain. That was his own burden and the nature of his quest; and the giving of comfort was a very hard thing indeed.

He would rather have been told to move the Earth.

He fought. The lady sorrowed and died. Gerhadras rose. Each night, Hormisdas prayed by the window, beneath the swollen Moon or the waning Moon, or in the darkness, looking out over the snowfields.

There was something wrong with time, here in this cursed place. Winter would not end. The spring did not come. Yet it seemed that the death-dance of the two knights and the lady went on for years, for centuries even, in the delirium of some unyielding dream.

Humbly, Sir Hormisdas prayed for an answer.

Yet he knew that his quest was a riddle, and that nothing is learned from a riddle if someone just gives you the answer; therefore what God wanted, what King Arthur wanted, what would be celebrated in story and song, was that the knight should grow in spirit during his quest and figure it out for himself.

That was how you'd find the Holy Grail, if anyone ever could.

Amid combat, amid weeping, amid weariness and pain, he slowly realized that he had all the pieces of the puzzle and had but to assemble them.

He fought.

The lady wept and died.

He would have lain in the tomb himself if he could, so great was his weariness. He didn't care if Gerhadras slid the slab over him and left him there for all time.

That was the answer: not fighting, not sweet words or anything else a knight might customarily offer, but the phrase was as obvious to him as the Moon. It was clear from the lady's weaving. The tiny figure of Sir Hormisdas therein depicted merely reclined. He did nothing, resolutely.

The way to stop it all was simply that. Just stop.

Continued on page 73

Many of us live with secret dragons.
Some of them are dangerous, some not.
But all are powerful.

Dragon OF CONSPIRACY

....the sky became fair, his hand pierced the gliding serpent

I. The Metaphysics of B. Garvey

THIS STORY IS NOT ABOUT BOBBY MOE Garvey, but since he conjured up the dragon, you should know a little about him—or more properly, about his outhouse. Bobby Moe Garvey's outhouse was silhouetted and permanently transfixed by the tangle of kudzu plants that welled up from behind his tar paper shack there past the edge of Miz Opaline Redon's field of ratty cotton, two miles southeast of Redgunk; there behind the house, withered stalks of neglected crop met the tick-cedar trees and the cypress of the black backwater swamp. It is down in that Redgunkish swampy woods that over the centuries many a little boy's fantasy has animated demonic and flesh-hungry fungi-men and many a little girl has dreamed into existence gingerbread voodoo-witches who cook and eat little brothers. And a man sitting there at the edge of order with the door propped open looking out into the mosquito-shadows could daydream that unformed black woodsy *prima materia* into what he willed, into what he willed. Used to be Odilon Sanders, for example, would come by to share a case

By William R. Eakin
Illustration By Joel Naprstek

of brews and about halfway through the night sit himself down out there and just about have to be extricated, because of too long a commerce with the weird-fungi swamp nymphs he was prone to invent. And Papa Joe Harper, visiting alone out at the swamp edge with his Mr. Jack Daniels, had his first stroke while visualizing some will-o'-the-wisp witch with much more beauty than reality in her sweat-sparkling skin.

It was a vestige of years gone by, this outhouse, and long, long after indoor plumbing was supplied in the Blake County Courthouse and the children of all those one-room schoolhouses moved up to the big cinderblock Consolidated Schools of Blake County to leave their own much-used Moon-doored sheds to the onslaught of kudzu and greenbrier and time, long after the City of Redgunk ran those big sewer lines out past Mabel Delashmit's cornfield to the trailer parks north and south on County Road 63, long after even some of the Emeritus Ladies of the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk had forgotten their childhood indignities on slick wooden seats and the freedoms of nothing-but-outdoor facilities, long, long after all the townfolk of Redgunk, Mississippi had forgotten the way fresh air will play on your skin and enliven it when it is not enclosed by concrete and artificial air conditioning, in other words, long, long after virtually everyone forgot what freedom was anyway, B. Garvey kept his outhouse, and refused to let the city bring in those big yellow monsters of road crew equipment with their giant gaping shovel-maws and long snakes of corrugated metal pipe and cranky plastic conduit, just so they could connect him up to the new line they were running and to all their systems of taxation and power. Even when city water was finally connected to that new development on the road to Nain and City starting picking up the trash, Mr. Garvey refused to give up his water well, refused to give up burning his own refuse (what little he did not store for further possible use in his front yard), refused to give up his outhouse. And his reasons for this obstinacy are still debated by those old philosophers down on the benches in the square, some years after his having been laid out with flowers in that nice casket his daughter purchased with his prepaid plan for the big funeral service held last year at the First Mount Zion Christian Church of Redgunk. Still debated because they were not unreasonable arguments, according to the citizenry. Not unlike those friends of his with National Rifle Association affiliations and some desire to secede from anything federal, Mr. Garvey sitting out there all alone in his outhouse developed a thoroughgoing picture of the way things were, a picture he mostly kept to himself though sometimes fielded off of old friends, like Papa Joe Harper before he got wheeled off to the Windy Pines Residence facility or Mr. Odilon Sandars, though Mr. Sandars had a substantial and driving financial interest in annexing, clearing the trees, and developing the infrastructure of that particular portion of Blake County, representing as he did the Kirby Corporation—on the sly, of course, and somewhat in a conflict of interest with his VP position down at the First State Bank of Redgunk—the Kirby Corporation whose chief mandate seemed to have been to shelter in nice tidy brick houses the lower-to-middlin' middle class of Redgunk, Mississippi—and this is something Mr. Garvey never even guessed at and something Mr. Sandars, who was a school friend of Garvey's from before the consolidation, something he would not have been likely to share, no more than, say, some devil-serpent in some garden plotting the downfall of humankind would have shared his ideas with Adam, and of course the serpent never even would have thought of saying explicitly that this was the better part of the reason for his relatively frequent visits over the years and why he always bought the beer.

But mostly like some hermit mountain man, Mr. Garvey kept to himself, and when he was all alone his brain whirred with a cotton candy fabric coming up out of it into an ideal world and, as men do when they are alone, he conjured for himself a universal picture of a large social, political, metaphysical conspiracy, related to that one that he believed had taken over most of the world and now wanted to take over Redgunk, Mississippi and the surrounding countryside, with some direct relationships no doubt to the falsified death of Elvis, the assassination of JFK, and the ascendancy of the Orient in Pacific Island matters of economics. But the bigger conspiracy aside, and more to the point, sitting there at the edge of his swamp, Mr. B. Garvey conceived a philosophy of local life—since, indeed, all life is local—which would direct his every social relation to the day he died: *First, you are what you eat; what you eat becomes your cells, your energy, your essence, and there ain't no difference between all the things a man's related to—e.g., what he eats—and his very essence, because everything he does and says and intakes, everything around a man that he hears and breathes and touches constitutes him, essentially. Second, if you are what is around you and what goes into you, you are what is processed by you, and so therefore what is excreted out the other side: You are your actions, your movements, your thoughts, your excretions—and so lose a tooth or drop some hair out of a comb into the wastebasket or piss in a stream, and that's us, part of us, gone its way into the world system—And God knows I ain't partial to the idea of finding parts of me slippin' down into some pipe to be all mixed up with the worst produce of all those other people, all those friggin' Redgunkers, because I am an individual and as such I have a right to a relationship just between me and the earth, without being absorbed into some mixed-up sewage-unit, into some dark union of stuff, some indescribable, ineffable, nondescript utter Oneness. Ain't nothin' right about that—in being swallowed up with all them other folks into the belly of the serpent they have become.*

All this is why you would never, never find Mr. Garvey before one of those sparkling urinals over in the rest area of the new interstate in the northeast corner of the county. Going like a cowboy, i.e., like his daddy and granddaddy before him on the roadside, with or without a tree, that was much better, providing as it did a more direct and individual and unmediated pure relationship with the ground, and hence the dust, and hence the stuff from whence we come, and hence ourselves.

And long before he passed away, at night when the Moon was full, B. Garvey would walk across the bit of field between his tar paper shack and where the city was laying out the connecting road and the sewer line there in the right of way between his place and Miz Redon's, and he would lie down on the black earth, in the weeds quickly growing up over the disturbed dirt, and set his ear to it and listen, and sure enough he would hear it—It!—and in response he would firmly set his grizzled jaws and steel his eyes and listen even more. And he would feel it down there, the serpent, its movements, its thoughts, though he could not access them. Down in the earth in that big snake of pipe, something moved and gurgled, something was rolling around in its own dark juices, something alive. And he knew it was the serpent, that subterranean dragonish worm birthed from the united waste of a whole people, a big conglomerate-ouroboros-thing of town-dweller waste stitched together by the conspiracies of countless town planners and foreign agents, made serpentine and made alive by the mere weight and volume of its raw material, a patchwork worm made of the discarded and processed parts of all those silly people who had given essential parts of themselves to it. And it is funny—or not so funny—what an old man can conjure into reality with just those dull lightning flicks of his neuroware: Because the serpent wasn't some merely imagined figment; it was real. B. Garvey conjured it into reality.

Of course, it was a storm sewer he was listening to and not what

he thought at all; sometimes after a particularly hard rain, water did run and wriggle down there like something alive; sometimes rats might scuttle through, or death's-head opossum. But there was no sewer of the sort B. Garvey imagined. In the underground ditch just some yards from his home there simply were two lines: a clean water line and beside it a storm sewer that took rainwater off the road. The Kirby Development Corporation (Nara, Japan) that had helped fund the building of the road and the laying of the pipe for the purpose of developing old Heywood Daschen's once mostly wooded two-hundred acre farm into a nice bedroom community complete with its own fast-food restaurant and pharmacy, the Kirby Corp. had supplied Elysian Acres with its own septic system, and so the line wasn't what B. Garvey thought it was at all; but his brain virtually seethed with that stuff that could have been flowing through it at any given moment, and his anger gave form to it, even that stuff that wasn't there, and made it into a slimy sewer-dragon.

His brain seethed: and some evenings around 5 PM-ish he'd watch the young professionals of Elysian Acres driving home in their look-alike minivans, with their look-alike faces made soft and similarly squashy and malleable like something out of a virtual reality machine by years of watching (when they were 30-ish) identical sitcoms on identical television sets, and (when they were younger) the same identical animated movies that kept them enrapt with the illusion that their own personal urges to creativity were met merely by watching and, of course, mass-consuming all related products—and now, of course, their children looked all the same, too, they all looked like all those other children in those clean well-regulated day cares all across the whole friggin' country, children fashioned in a single mold by the wearing of those identical catalog Osh-by-gosh toddler clothes and the funny sneakers with heels that light up with the mysterious artificial power of something toxic and plastic, and the little logos shaved into their heads, children fashioned into one single form by playing on those same damned identical blue, red, and yellow plastic playsets in their identical backyards with their Dad's barbecue pits grilling identically packaged chicken breasts—and B. Garvey would listen to his own memories in that breast of his, he heard his childhood singing as he went back and forth on the old tire swing Daddy put in the elm and B. Garvey would listen to his own memories, and hear his own voice respond with a kind of gay laughter at the *Howdy Doody Radio Show* and gasp at the *Shadow*, and it wasn't just nostalgia—it was anger and fear that he felt, and mostly just the anger and fear of getting old and coming to the end and feeling a stranger to a world that was once to him something comforting and like home.

Be spent most of his conscious hours grumbling against: *those damned kids and kids of kids, they are so damned uniform from not just going to the same damned animated films, but by consuming them and digesting them in the privacy of their own homes in the form of videos with peppy music and flashing-fast editing for more modern attention spans, and food ain't food any more, is it, but some stopping-off-at-the-drive-thru plastic stuff in Happy Hoppy Kiddie meals with their little video characters smiling the same smile that the ancient Greek kouros statues—which I remember quite well from textbooks at school—were meant to warn future generations of.* He watched the kids of kids, and grumbled and folded himself inward, and listened to the snake writhing through the pipes toward Elysian Acres.

Then after hours and hours of being just about angry enough to bust, he would get exhausted from it and feel growing up in him a real sorrowful feeling for them, even though they looked over and thought of him as nothing but some old geezer in a tar paper shack with a bunch of rusted junker automobile husks in his front yard, a bunch of washers, dryers, refrigerator carcasses, great stacks of automobile tires, busted high chairs and car seats and even a few toxic disposable diapers, even though they looked over and thought of him as nothing—nothing at all—well, he had a real sorrowful feeling for them.

It all ended when Werner Gant got the idea he could sell fruit smoothies to the Elysian Acres crowd in the late hot of the afternoon after work, Smoothies being just a nickel of banana and papaya and less than that of ice but something you could sell for maybe two-fifty, and Werner bought that old Mr. Goodbar ice cream truck that Fred Drummer used to drive up and down the streets of Redgunk after the War, and he refurbished it and replaced that tinkly ice-cream-man music with 'seventies-retro-aerobics stuff like "Shake, Shake Your Bootie" and "I'm Your Boogie Man" to let people know that something cutting edge and delicious was on its way up the road, and when the Smoothie truck went by (and no doubt the farmers stopped their haying and got down off their tractors and came in off the fields with excitement, thinking "Oh boy, a Smoothie and maybe a sprouts-and-cream-cheese sandwich!"), when the Smoothie truck went by for the first time, crotchety old Garvey was lying with his angry ear to the ground listening to that snake crawling in the subterranean passages below Redgunk and he just friggin' exploded: He did not get it; he could not look up over his tire-piles and kudzu-covered little life to see the advancement of human potential in some Smoothie truck or to see what, just every now and then, Mr. Odilon Sandars let slip out was "the amazing benefits to a community of development" development development, and instead of conceding to the townfolk that more people and more houses meant more money for the Consolidated Schools of Blake County and for the whole of the infrastructure and therefore made life better, instead of that, he stood there and grumbled louder and louder, grumbled fucking grumbled til his own negativity got so damned loud it busted out of his skin and killed him off. And that is what happened to Bobby Moe Garvey.

But, as I have said, before he died he created the real dragon. He imagined the great serpent-thing being formed out of that earthy-underground-unthought-of stuff a community really is in its essence, that slimy smelly stuff. He imagined the dragon-thing strongly enough that if it had wanted to, on its own, it could have broken through the steel and ceramic and concrete and come into the world to stalk the streets of Redgunk and break up the waterlines and the new cable television fiber optic tentacles running through the earth, and eat a bunch of young pseudo-urban danged Redgunk-professionals and smash smash smash that damned music-tinkling shake-your-booty Smoothie Mobile and then fly glittering with its own wetness above the rolling fields and the kudzu-woods and up into the very heavens themselves. It was that real.

And before he died, if you went with B. Garvey to lie there with him and you, too, set your ear on the ground to listen you would also come to know that there really was a beast down there. You would be so sure of it that the magic of your mind and his would make the whole Redgunkish countryside turn dizzily, and the stars spangling across the country sky would go all unfamiliar in their color, and a mist would soak down into the air around you, and the strange, long, lonely, croaking that the frogs in the swamp do to serenade the stars would grow weirdish, so that you would come to know that the frogs and the stars had entered into some secret commerce, their harmony flowing up toward and down out of the sky in a great arch of sound that warped the whole of the world into a circle, so that the curved world turned, too, around the shape of that sewer line, so that the whole warped world rolled around the sewer line and around the great muddy serpent within. That is what you would see and hear if you lay there long enough

with old man Garvey: that the world and the whole of the starry sky was a sphere, revolving and revolving and revolving around some muddy serpent. And that the serpent was real.

II. Mr. Garvey's Own Daughter

What Mr. Garvey never realized was that a thing such as the dragon so invested with sentience and hence reality, to the degree that it becomes real, is also invested with its own needs, and what it needed most was to get out of the damned sewer; it could frolic through the fresh water that poured in from Ouchita Reservoir, it could loop through the falls that ran off the dam and down into the long narrow passageways into Water Treatment; it could raucously play in the twisting labyrinth of tunnels under the streets and houses of Redgunk; it could slip and slide and slither, as it often did, in the muds and gray sluggish waters of Waste Management, or with a magnetic thrill of pure will it could rush madly down the straightaway under County 63 and down the new extension road that led along Miz Opaline Redon's property line to shoot through the main and out into the many pipe-branches below the nice almost-suburban homes of Elysian Acres, but push and push and push and rush and rush and rush like mad, with all its might, it could not go past the cutoff and the hydrant there at the very end of the main line: Try as it might, it could not do so. It could watch, of course, through the hydrant: there at the end beyond the conduit system were weeds and kudzu and woods and blue sky and the fields and fields of a Mississippi beyond the city limits and the recently annexed Elysian Acres, and in the weeds and kudzu of that place just below the hydrant where neither City nor County had yet mowed, there was a family of buntings, birds, six iridescent indigo buntings, to be exact, and a painted one, this with its miraculous patchwork of colors: the startling blue-violet of its head, the brilliant yellow-green wings, the rich scarlet of its little body. It—the painted bunting—was unlike anything the dragon knew because in the sewer lines all things got muddy and unclear. It—the painted bunting—was equally unlike, too, the nice clean plastic colors of the playsets of Elysian Acres that it could see from the various sprinklers in the various well-manicured lawns. The buntings had real color. They were alive. And the painted bunting fluttered fluttered fluttered there at the edge, suspended, delicate as a cobweb, authentically alive. Its life and the overabundance of life force in the other bluish buntings were amazing to the subterranean beast and sometimes, some lonely afternoons, it rushed rushed rushed with all the might of its massive coils to the end of the line just to startle them from their thicket and watch them race into the air, pure color in flight. It rushed rushed rushed below the straight streets and below the movement of the Smoothie Mobiles and minivans to suddenly fill the faucets and hover there with its eye at the opening like a heavy drop of water to watch the birds flash into the sky and into their world of sheer freedom and bird-joy, a world that it could not enter, try as it might, it could not enter, and though I said earlier that if it willed it, it could burst right out of the system, well—.

I suppose you must know why it was so caught in the system, why it couldn't just follow the buntings—after all, it sensed it had wings, and it was right, golden shiny wings, though they'd never unfolded: Why couldn't it just flop some night out of some woman's showerhead or blast upward as a kind of rainbow out of the sprinkler system at the Redgunk Country Club or scare the hell out of some kid drinking from the water dispenser down in the square in front of the statue of Colonel Beauregard Ryan Howdy, scare the hell out of him and run and be free? The answer is this: that while indeed it was conjured into real existence by a mistaken identification of the sewer line off B. Garvey's property and by an obsessive compulsion on the part of cranky old Mr. Garvey for seeing conspiracy in the lines, still it was not conjured from nothing but rather from that interconnectedness Garvey rightly sensed in any public works, this water line touching that water line, below this street and then that, a web, a grid, a latticework: this indeed was its essence, this interconnectedness that had made it possible at all, and to take it away, well—. You can see how it might want to push push push to the very end just to watch through the pores of the cutoff as the lovely buntings flashed away, flashed away and left it full of a fearful yearning just to follow them, a fearful yearning. It is not that it was not real: If it had wanted to, as I have already explained, it could have broken through the steel and ceramic and concrete and come into the world to stalk the streets of Redgunk and to fly glittering on its own wet but golden wings above the rolling fields and the kudzu-woods. If it had wanted to—but it would have wanted to very, very badly, more than anything, because he knew that one flash, which could surely last no longer than an eye-blink, a millisecond, the time it takes for some quark to come out of and recede into the background universe, it knew that flash would also take him beyond the conditions of its existence, beyond the network, and therefore its life; well—there are very few things we want badly enough, indeed, to blast our ways out, out, altogether and irrevocably out.

Mr. Garvey was dead some year before the lawyers could probate and clear all the paperwork and legal things that surround anyone dead, even men who have worked all their lives to be hermits; but when that happened, Irene May Iversham came with Baby Tuckoo to live in the tar paper shack across the road from Miz Opaline Redon's cotton fields. Irene Iversham—who had selected her own surname when her daddy had forbidden her his, at least emotionally—Irene Iversham had a dream and that was to someday plow under her father's trash piles left in the front from that old man's life and to tear down altogether the old tar paper shack in which her mother died bearing her, B. Garvey being averse to doctors and their bills, so that she and Baby Tuckoo could build themselves a nice two-bedroom brick place, with nice efficient appliances and indoor plumbing, not unlike those over at the Elysian Acres, and maybe even put one of those plastic swing sets in the front yard. And she wanted this not from some spite against Garvey, but because of the way he'd treated her, as if she killed his wife, which she sort of did, the way he'd treated her had led her to do what she had done and to become what she'd become, and she could not help wanting better.

B. Garvey was dead some year, and Irene May did not rip down the outhouse, even though it stood now completely covered by the snaky, supernatural green tendrils of the woods itself, and so was part of the landscape to be ignored, but rather she left it there to be torn down later, maybe when Baby Tuckoo turned 11 and could help her trim back the woods into something manageable and mow the back into some sort of real yard with a real grass lawn and not just trash and weeds. When Baby Tuckoo turned 11: that was the absurdity, wasn't it? You do not leave AMA—against medical advice—from Felpham General Hospital, not under the circumstances, and expect someday to have a teenage boy mowing your yard. But you do give him what you can as soon as you can. You give him very quickly the things your father never gave you.

And she needed water and some sort of indoor rest room facilities, and quickly, because if Baby Tuckoo did happen to make it to potty training, she would not have him do it like her Daddy Garvey made her do, with splinters and the fear of black widows to add to the general angst of a child growing up without her

mama. And because of that, and because she was afraid the ladies of the Department of Human Services might just take Baby Tuckoo away, as they said they might if she took him back home AMA, especially if she did not have the proper facilities for raising a child much less a really sick one, because of that she let Mr. Odilon Sandars, who was VP in charge of loan processing down at the First State Bank of Redgunk, she let him know she just might need to apply for a loan to hire someone with a backhoe to dig across her front yard and run a fresh water line in, the going rate being 40 cents a foot just for the CV pipe and 40 dollars an hour for heavy equipment operation, and then to maybe install toilet equipment on the back porch, which could be walled in, and maybe a sink big enough to bathe little Baby Tuckoo in. And of course she did not tell him that something was wrong with Baby Tuckoo, that was between her and the doctors and God, but she did say, "And I got this young baby, as you know, and a baby like that needs clean, good water, not that stale sickly stuff out of the old well, a place that's clean and good and—not worrisome."

And nice Mr. Odilon Sandars smiled that real understanding smile of his and looked on her with those eyes well practiced in his version of compassion, and he said, "Now dear—" and he could speak to her like that, since they were shut up in his private office, "—you know how difficult it might be, even for a man with my say-so, to secure a loan from some lending agent for a mere whore, and one with an illegitimate child at that."

She looked down at that comment and did not let him see her eyes: No baby was ever illegitimate.

"But," added Mr. Sandars, those overly bushy brows of his arching up the way they do when he pretends to think something new, though some version of it has long been plotted out, "But your daddy and I went way way back, Irene May, like family, and I would certainly be glad to think through some possibilities for someone who is, well, like a daughter, though you and I both know he disowned you emotionally if not legally a long, long time ago. Now let's think about this—I can't in good business conscience do the loan for you as an individual, but suppose this, suppose I—I as a private entrepreneur, though entirely, entirely just to help you out—suppose I bought that land from you and I myself put in the water lines and the septic system—"

Ilrene straightened at this, obviously startled. And he said, "Now, dear, think about it, you are, of course, in your rights to be living there, but if you think how often you went there to see your old man and, on the other hand, how often I went there to be with him, why I'd say I had the visitation rights—now what I'm offering is to let you stay there and rent the place—I know, don't look so startled—think about it: I would bear the cost of improvements both for your daddy's house and, of course, any others that might someday go up—you of course, merely pay a little rent outta—. No, no, instead let's do this: I'll do this, and I'm making this offer because you are Garvey's blood and because, frankly, no other girl down at Burly Bob's Bar and Grill can hold a candle to the things you can do for a man: Let me take the property off your hands for a fair market price, and I'll refurbish that old house for now and within two years after I finish the new addition out at Elysian Acres, I'll tear the house down and build you a brick one, a nice one, and let you stay there rent free, rent free, and all I'm asking is that you sell the worthless pile of junk to me, and—hell, maybe every now and then when Patricia is in Memphis for one of her flower shows, then I'll come over for just a little, well, evening entertainment—nothing you wouldn't be doing in your line of business anyway."

"I am retired from that business, Mr. Sandars."

"Oh, now, Irene darling, you can't let something like a little baby put an end to your professional career. Why, I know for a personal fact a number of those girls at Burly Bob's have fostered out their babies to keep right on—"

"I am retired from that business, Mr. Sandars."

"But, darling, you ain't gonna get a loan for damned sure if you don't have any income at all! And the well on your daddy's place has been condemned by the state, you know, for the bacteria in it, and you can't collect rainwater—without a cistern—and that boy of yours is gonna need water for his formula and his baby cereal, you understand what I'm saying, and the state ain't gonna take kindly to a woman starving her newborn—"

And the state did not like her anyway, no they did not, not with what they knew about her. Ever since they found out about the reason for her epigastric pain, after the doctors down at the Felpham Hospital did that expensive tomographic scan of her belly and charged the welfare office for it, to find those large masses in her gut that no one could figure out what they were, and did that highly specialized highly expensive laparotomy only to excise the cause of it all, all the panic and all the expense, those trichobezoars. Hair balls. From chewing her hair too damned much, they told her. Chewing her hair. Well, damn it, you might chew your hair, too, if all you had to look forward to was life at Burly Bob's, you would chew your hair, and you would do it even more instead of stopping if you came up pregnant, probably (given your biological algorithms) from that man Tucker-something from Blue Falls. Well no one was real happy about the bezoars, no one was real happy with her at all, and that was before they found she was having a baby.

They'll take that baby away from you if you can't take care of it, Irene May—" *And he don't even know about me leaving AMA. The state don't like me, not with me spending tax money I didn't pay into, not since the bezoars, and not since the baby, and not since*—not since that dropping moment when the blood tests that they'd taken on mama and child came back and her yet bigger problem opened out and changed the world, her problem, and Baby Tuckoo's.

Mr. Sandars stood and went over to the Goodwill stroller and looked in to see the baby still asleep; he'd thought he'd heard him gurgling, but it must have been something in the sink at the wet bar behind him, some change in pressure. He rolled the stroller back and forth just a little, as if to console the child, and what it did was wake him up and make him start crying.

"You think about what I'm offering," said Sandars as the mama jumped up to take the baby in her arms.

"I tell you, I am retired—" *And he don't know the half of why—*

"Well, you think on it, and I will, too, and I'll come visit you out at your daddy's place, and pace off the line and see maybe how much it would cost to help you out in the way that I have specified."

More gurgling in the wet bar sink, and something of an eye, an emerald eye, looking out with a kind of bewilderment, and seeing right into the face of that baby. And the dragon could see the herpes already damaging Baby Tuckoo's new eyes and his still-unfolding nervous system, and he could sense the virus sunk deep in the baby's viscera. And in his mama's, too.

And the dragon rolled over and slept. In the tight quarters of the water system below Redgunk, Mississippi it had to keep its golden wings folded along its serpentine body, and the gold was naturally covered with something of the grayish-green slime that comes to line the pipes, copper and lead, of such a system. The dragon rolled over from where it had watched them there in the sink in the VP office of the First State Bank of Redgunk, where it had watched and seen and known all the truth of the event and all the feelings and all the things that had led up to it. And the sleep it sought was something, admittedly, of an attempt to turn it off, to forget that little baby's eyes. And to forget what it was, some mere slime monster, some half-real, incapable *something* lolling about the sewers and not—not the curling medicinal caduceus-snakes of ancient healing, not the sacred powerful health-bearing serpents of an ancient Asklepieion-hospital, the dream-bearing divine snakes of new life and new health and wholeness and hope—but how could snakes heal, anyway? For that—for that—the sacred serpents must be real and twisting and turning and

dancing out beyond the confines of some pipe-system, but that meant—it knew too well what that meant. Besides, what tools could they possibly use? Their fire, their poison? Some mere sewer snake. It had looked into that little baby's eyes and it had seen the horror: Healing was impossible, wasn't it? Impossible? So it slept.

It slept, or rather tried to sleep, but this was something it was never very good at; at night, when the Redgunkers were asleep and only a few of the older women sat up, like Mrs. Marna Pritchard—she never being one to sleep at night, powdering herself in her pink wallpapered bathroom—the dragon swam through the pipes below the sleepers, made them rattle in some of those older places down near the square, swam and wished it could stretch out its golden wings: one moment, one moment and it could burst out and flash up and the stars would open wide, wide across the sky, and the stars would dance with it, and it would have come into its own, some golden fiery dragon dancing and singing a bellowing dragon song in one fiery phoenix blaze that shook the cosmos, that made the stars swim, that made the frogs in all the swamps across Blake County leap, leap and shout, shout their harmonies, shout for the sheer joy of living, though the living lasted only that one, brief, starry, tiny point in time. It would stretch out its wings and like some ethereal paper they would explode with flame; and then there would be a cool darkness, a cool Moon shadow spreading over the land, and the frogs would settle themselves for yet another dawn.

When it finally slept, the dragon dreamed dreams only a sewer-serpent might have. It dreamed of wings, only not golden ones, wings with tarnish, wings with a seaweed-like gutter stuff oozing from their lizard-tips, pterodactyl-like, perhaps even evil and certainly—not golden. Disturbing dreams. It dreamed of Baby Tuckoo's face, the golden face, only not golden. It dreamed it saw the virus running through it and it dreamed it had given the virus to Baby Tuckoo, though this was not the case; nevertheless, it dreamed it was somehow responsible, as perhaps everyone in Redgunk was responsible. And it dreamed uneasily of Irene May's mama, and of the single moment she must have had with her own child.

And the dragon rolled in the pipes and was flushed into the water main, and rolled and woke; it was day, and early morning light filtered into faucets and drains and gave an eerie light to the network. And the dreams of the night tore at it; it needed comfort, it needed escape; it needed to wipe away the memory of the face of Baby Tuckoo and maybe more especially the baby's mama's, her shocked and hurt face, and so it rushed forward through the currents of fluid, rushed forward like a baby coming into being, pushed and pushed and willed itself through the storm sewers of County Road 63 and out the connecting road past Miz Redon's property and past past past that place where mama and baby were living without water, past that and then ripping at top speed, top-lightning-dragon speed through the curves and connections below the mundane world of Elysian Acres and out faster and faster toward the end of the line, and suddenly there it was, the end, and it leaped into it and filled the end with its presence, and rattled the great cutoff there, rattled it as it always did to scare the buntings into the air, to see and drink and taste their color and their freedom, and it rattled the end of the line and watched for the feathered flight and—there was no color, no motion. No, there was: On the other side of the pipe-world, some yellow bulldozer-thing was moving earth; the clump of weeds was gone, of course, where they were making that new addition to Elysian Acres. As were the buntings, the indigo buntings and the painted one. As were the buntings.

III. The Problems of Heightened Sentience

Before he died, Mr. B. Garvey used to walk out in the middle of the moonlit night and lie on that much-disturbed earth and listen to the storm sewer below him, and listen to the gurgling of all the water and the waste and interconnected subterranean workings of a people, and he thought he heard the worm turning down there, turning fitfully as if in a bad dream, and often when he heard that, he would cry, because he would hear in that turning the things a town, and a people, and a single person could do to another person, the kind of things he could do; he blamed the whole damned world for what she'd become, that poor little girl of his, he blamed them—meaning all of them, including himself. And if he could have, he would have reached down into the earth, plunged his man's fist into the earth, to strangle the worm, to grasp that dragon and squeeze it til it lay dead for what it had done to her, for what he had done and could not undo, seeing how he'd blamed her all this time for her mother's death, seeing how he was always all along a crotchety old man anyway who did not deserve to live with people, a hermit made so of his own accord by his own damned unwillingness to be with anyone else, the whole damned town, or his own daughter, how he was always all along a crotchety old man made that way by his angry, paranoid back-and-forth with Redgunk and those Elysian Acre dwellers, and by his enraged listening that invested so much energy into that which he listened for, investing so much energy into it that he put a great, huge part of himself in that worm after all, and as he listened, listened, listened to that thing in the ground, he knew it more and more fully, knew more and more fully how he himself had helped make the worm-of-the-world, and that it was impossible to take it back and to heal, impossible, wasn't it? How he himself sent her away to Burly Bob's, and God, he would give anything, anything to go to her, anything to lift a father's ire from his prostitute daughter's heart, anything—anything—for a single sharp moment of reconciliation.

Mr. Odilon Sandars was 70 but still very robust, very robust with his sleek hairy arms under his perpetually rolled-up sleeves, and he attributed his robustness to heavy drinking and sex, neither of which had anything to do with his wife, Patricia, but which had a lot to do with the young slinky girls down at Burly Bob's Bar and Grill on the Numan County line, and a lot to do with Irene May Iversham. And he wasn't about to let his special diet come to an end, or to give up on the Garvey place, not after so many years of working at it. And—he drank a little whiskey before he drove out to see what the Redgunk Light and Water boys had done the past few days at his direction. Because without checking with her again, he'd told the city to go ahead and set a meter there in the waterline right about where a connection would run toward the house. And he had his own boys break off from working on the new addition to come down and be ready to go ahead and dig the ditch and lay the conduit to get that poor girl and her baby some fresh water.

And when he came up through the front yard trash to the half-torn screen door of the porch, she did not feel as if she could do anything but let him in to talk. And they sat down on the couch, she trying to nurse that baby rather unsuccessfully through a layer or two of slip and flowery dress.

And he said simply, "I do hope you have changed your mind, darling. I hope you have changed your mind."

And she replied simply, "I want water for my baby, running water, and a clean indoor bathroom."

And he took that for the sign, rather with something of a greedily beating heart, and he stood and signaled to the men who waited outside and they started up the backhoe and immediately proceeded to dig the ditch that led first to the outside front of the house and then back toward the back, where they'd been instructed that another house might someday soon stand in place of the outhouse. Another house or two.

And as they dug and a whole crew of men started laying conduit in, Mr. Sandars watched her nursing that baby, like she was some kind of property of his, and he took large fast swallows of the Jack Daniels he'd brought along; he and Papa Joe and Garvey had once upon a time slammed the stuff together here, that and the beer, and he'd never been able to convince that old fart

to go in on the development business, or to sell. Good things come to him who waits.

He watched her nurse and at first it made her nervous, though he'd seen many times anything she had to show, but then she loosened up, something he liked, and he offered her a swig, which she declined.

"All right," he said, "but I want you to put that baby down soon, you hear?"

She heard. But she'd not signed a damned contract. She'd not signed a damned contract.

She stood, Baby Tuckoo falling into a half-sleep at her nipple, and she walked to the window. *I would really do it with him—if I knew a man would not catch the disease, too. Damn it.* There was an open trench now all the way out to the outhouse, B. Garvey's outhouse, and CV pipe most of the way through it, and she said, "Stop'em. Stop them, Mr. Sandars."

Odilon looked up into her eyes with something of a surprise. He was drunk. He said, "Now darling, they're almost finished, there ain't no—"

"I don't—I don't want them doin' it."

"You are as stubborn as your daddy was."

"Yes, sir."

He stood, wobbly, stood and pointed at her and said, "I come out here to do this for you, and tomorrow I'll bring the papers to make it all legal, and today, today, I wanna collect the first month's rent, see?"

She saw. She held Baby Tuckoo a little closer to her. He was sweet, that baby, sweet and sick. And the doctors' prattle fell through her ears: The virus is shed from the cervix or from the lower genital area into the uterus and that's the most likely way the baby was exposed—*Being born, you mean? While he was being born?* Did it matter now whether there was water or not, whether the house was made of brick, whether there would someday be a yard? There sure as hell wasn't going to be some plastic colorful swing set. There sure as hell wasn't going to be a video player for animated kids' movies. There sure as hell weren't gonna be any drive-thrus and kiddie meals. "We have to be honest with you, Miss Iversham," with the emphasis on the *Miss*: "We're looking at a 60 percent mortality rate." "Here in the hospital? If we stay here in the hospital would the chances be—" "Sixty percent mortality rate." "Then what—what can be done?"

And the dragon in the water lines screamed, the dragon in the water lines that seemed to know everything past and future, and that heard the "Nothing can be done," the dragon in the water lines and the part of the worm that would have been a grandfather and a father, that part of it, screamed, screamed, and its smoky roar echoed in the old system in downtown Redgunk and in the new lines of Elysian Acres; it screamed when it heard the doctor's words, and it screamed again when those same words echoed in her heart; and out in the kudzu-waters of the swamps, the frogs fell silent.

And now Mr. Sandars, who was so drunk, in fact, that he was having trouble standing, Mr. Sandars said, "Look darling, I need to go out to the little boy's room—" He took several steps and added, "Maybe this'll be one of the last times I'll need to step outside for it. You stay here, darlin', and in a few minutes we'll consummate our agreement—yes—"

And he stepped into the yard, passed the line with its pipe sitting open, and he climbed into B. Garvey's outhouse and looked back through the door which was warped and hence now always slightly ajar. And he saw the open end of that new pipe looking right at him like the barrel of a shotgun. And he heard something moving inside it, something scurrying around like a rat or a death's-head possum, something roaring in the far distance in there, like water rushing or flame, distant and empty flame.

And now the woman stood above the pipe, she and the baby. And they looked strange to him. The baby was not dead, but was lying floppy-like, as if he were, blue and rubbery; and they both gave off a kind of blue light, she holding him like that as if he were dead, as if they were the Madonna and child of a Pietà, as if they were bluish, weirdish ghosts.

"Mr. Sandars," she said, "I don't want your water here."

And the hollow echoing roaring sound in the pipes filled him with a sudden and inexplicable panic and an emptiness; it was not that he was scared for himself; no, it was as if he were scared for everything, for this harmless Baby Tuckoo, whom he knew somehow to be dying, scared for a whole universe in which such a thing could happen to babies at all; and all the sales and development in the whole wide county, in the whole wide world, seemed of no consequence whatsoever. He felt the disease in the baby, he felt the crying in the woman's breasts, in her milk, he felt the cry cry crying of a father-grandfather lost in the pipes, unable to make the world better for his babies, the crying of the dragon-beast that felt all those things, all those feelings, as fully as if they were its own original feelings. And Mr. Sandars felt it all now, too; at the presence of that thing in the line, that empty echoing, he felt it all.

It would have been better for some reptilian fire-breathing monster to blast out of the pipe and grab him with wild teeth and sharp talons and rip out his throat, than to make him see in that distant sound and in that pipe-end all he'd done with himself and to himself, and hence to see himself like this, in a universe of his own making, in a universe made this way in part by the conspiracies of men.

And the dragon breathed, smoked, watched from inside that pipe: Oh, and the dragon could very well have ripped from the system as that man stood before it, baffled, and could have torn him to shreds in that brief last moment of existence; and the dragon would have, it would have, it really would have, if it had not seen the expression on that man's face and in that same moment thought of Baby Tuckoo and had it not seen then that they—all these humans—were babes out there, both the 60 percent, and the 40 percent who survived. And all the others. Breathing, smoking, watching: The dragon caught itself in the tiny conduit, and tried to catch its breath, suspended with its legs against the inside of the pipe and looking out into that world. And then it, too, felt the panic and the emptiness, and it fled back in, quickly, back into the system, looking for shelter.

Mr. Odilon Sandars could say nothing. He could not shout into that pipe. He could not look in the woman's eyes. He could not begin to comprehend what he felt, as if the sorrow were far too big for any human capacity to feel at all. He could not look in her eyes or talk, or think or scream out aloud or even silently at the thing in the pipes that had shown him this, or rather made him feel this, made him feel so damned acutely *the way things were* for Baby Tuckoo, and for all the Irene Mays, and all the babies, and all the Odilon Sandars. He could not even scream silently. And so he left. Mr. Odilon Sandars got up and left. He got up and was gone.

And Irene May stepped down and turned round with that baby and faced the end of the pipe, full of bafflement herself, because she'd seen something reflecting in that banker's eyes, and in his face, something neither she nor the doctors nor the bankers nor the city utility men could begin to explicate. She heard that thing now, echoing way down in there. What was in there, rushing around in there as if it looked for something? What was it that now stopped its withdrawal and started back this way, this thing that now moved toward her, now rushed toward her? It was coming down the pipe at her, wasn't it, at her and her baby! What was it? The 60 percent? Some fire-breathing slimy Death? Something

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Sometime we get the chance to right a wrong.
It's up to us to recognize it for what it is.

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

I STAND ON THE SHORELINE AND WATCH AS THE PLANE RACES ACROSS THE LAKE, WAVES SLAPPING AT ITS FLOATS. THE PILOT guns the engine, the whine of the propellers rises in pitch, and then it heaves itself into the air. The plane banks to the right, still over the lake, then the pilot waggles his wings. I wave in return, then watch and listen as it fades out of sight and hearing.

The wind is a bit blustery and cool today, but the Sun is shining and it is certainly no worse than I might have been expecting. I pull the canoe farther up onto the rocky shore, then grab some gear from the great pile of it on the ground and load it into the canoe. A nearby copse of awkward-looking trees will provide shelter from the wind for the night, I hope, and so I drag the canoe across the ground, straining against the weight on the rope and against the wind.

There is indeed a small clearing, enough to pitch my tent. I flip the canoe on its side to act as a windbreak, then get the tent up and tied down. After that, I dig a hole for the fire, gather wood, then start it up and get to work on supper. Hunched in behind the canoe I only feel the wind in its brief forays as a southerly, and the Sun will remain in the sky until quite late tonight.

From my pack I pull out my Grandpa's diary and read, pausing only to top up my coffee or stand and look around whenever I hear a twig crack or another unfamiliar sound of nature, so far away from home.

FOR 10 YEARS, AT THE PEAK OF THE DEPRESSION, MY GRANDPA WAS A TRAPPER UP NORTH. IT WAS here on Artillery Lake where he had his trap line, he and his father, one line reaching like a finger due north before looping back south; the other crooking northeast and then southeast, eventually forming a rough diamond.

He told me stories of his life up north, and even in my sullen teen years when he sounded only like a cranky and insignificant old man, a part of me still yearned to hear tales of real-life adventure, although no doubt embellished through years of retelling.

As both of us got older I lost touch with him, me moving to a different city and he folding himself into that private space old age often brings. But those stories stuck with me, and now, looking for a different challenge in my life and, even more, a connection with the man Grandpa was, I am here.

BY DERRYL MURPHY
Illustration By Ken Graning

I watch helplessly as the bullet

IT IS THREE DAYS SINCE I ARRIVED HERE, AND I BELIEVE I AM AT THE LOCATION OF THE CABIN WHERE MY GRANDPA AND HIS father once lived. It isn't much; bushes and stunted trees sticking out from amid old planks, a circle of blackened stones nearby that signifies a former campfire. The sod roof would have collapsed and disintegrated decades ago, and any furniture they had I suppose they would have either burned near the end, or else took out by dog sled or canoe and barge.

It's a good spot, better than the one I had chosen. Nearby is a stream, and while the cabin was built up higher, it is still protected by a little hillock and a stand of trees. I break down my campsite and throw as much as I can in the canoe, follow the shore as I ride the choppy waves, spray and foam blowing up against my face and hands. By the end of the fourth trip my fingers are blue, and it is all I can do to pile loose kindling and light a new fire in the old circle of rocks. As I sit there warming up, I imagine that my Grandpa and his father sit beside me doing the same, waiting for my say-so to get the camp put together.

When I'm finally warm enough I get the tent back up, moving aside a few old boards to make sure there's room. Tomorrow I'll start working on putting together a shelter that's a little more durable. If I want to stay here for the winter, I could certainly use something more than a thin wall of nylon.

THERE WAS A CAST-IRON STOVE, RUSTING BUT STILL WHOLE, LYING IN THE WEEDS ABOUT 50 YARDS FROM CAMP. AFTER SPENDING OVER TWO hours wrestling it a few meager feet, it struck me that I could load it on the toboggan and slide it along. Still a lot of work, but I managed to get it into place, nestled into a bed of rocks and sand. Lying beside it was enough still-good piping to vent it off to the side and out a wall of my little cabin, and for the first time since the seasons began the change-over, I'm warm.

Three walls are wood, the back one is the side of the little hill. The roof sweeps in one direction, down from the hill, and the small door I have to crouch to get through is set in the side, near the front. I managed to scrounge most of the wood for the roof, and spent a good three weeks chopping trees and planing logs with the axe, giving myself a good half-hour at the end of each day to sharpen the blade in anticipation of more chopping. Before the snow falls I even manage to construct myself a crude bed. But the stove is the true sign of civilization, in place only days before the first skiff of snow settles in.

BATH NIGHT. THE LAKE AND STREAM ARE ALL FROZEN NOW, SO I SCOOP SNOW AND, SOMETIMES, CHOPPED ice into my two buckets, melt them on the stove. I stand there, naked except for my boots, lather up my hair and soap up my body, then reach blindly for the second bucket and dash out the door into the minus-30-odd night, gasping in relief from the almost oppressive heat and steam that are built up, then gasping even louder as the cold penetrates the hot water I am pouring over my head and body. Then back inside, dry myself by standing by the stove, picking newly formed icicles from my eyebrows and beard.

When I'm all done, I settle down on the edge of the bed for some fresh caribou steak and canned peaches.

EIGHT MILES OR SO FROM THE CABIN IS THE FORMER CAMP OF A COMPATRIOT OF MY GRANDPA'S, A MAN NAMED JOE March. I have read in the diary how their paths would cross once in a while, and there is mention of some dark moment where their lives intersected, murder and mayhem hinted at, although it is nothing he expands on, and nothing he ever mentioned to me. What the diary does have is a sketched map and a set of directions to both the camp and to something he calls the "cairn." I had not imagined I would be curious about this, but now that my northern life has settled into a routine, I find that I am.

And so I load up the toboggan with my tent, my sleeping bag, emergency supplies, and food. Then I wax my skis and strap them on, sling my rifle across my back, and with one more check of the GPS unit in my pocket and the compass and map draped around my neck, head out.

The day is splendid, the Sun out and low on the horizon, not a cloud in the sky. This time of year I should still have enough light to make it to the old camp and find a place to pitch my tent for the night.

Twice in the distance I see Arctic fox or hare, hard to discern white-on-white from such a distance. Too far for me to haul out my rifle, not that I have terrible need for food right now anyway.

My Grandpa told me a story once, of he and his father and this Joe March and his son, riding their dog sleds, coming off a trap line and sliding out onto the frozen, snowy lake. There was a mother caribou and her calf, bounding through the snow and aiming for the shelter of trees, about a thousand yards away.

Grandpa reached down, still riding the back of his sled, and pulled out his rifle. The others laughed at him, told him he was crazy to think he could hit anything from such a distance. But he didn't listen, jumped from the sled, and with the rifle held against his hip and still running from the momentum, let off a shot.

"Dropped that goddamn mother with a bullet right through the spine," he told me. "Shut up those sons of bitches real quick." Then they rode to where she lay, warm blood melting and staining the crusty snow, and finished off the calf, standing and bleating helplessly for its mother to stand.

Food for them and for the dogs.

I had expressed doubt about this tale sometime later, talking with my father. Dad just laughed, and told me how Grandpa would knock the puff off a dandelion from 50 yards, and pointed out how every hunting season he was able to come home with a good-sized moose in the back of the truck.

A STORM IS BREWING. THE WIND HAS PICKED UP, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT RAKING ROCK-HARD PELLETS OF SNOW against my face, and the clouds are building swiftly. I hunch over to peer at my GPS unit, compare it briefly to the map while holding a flashlight in my teeth, then swear as I angle myself more toward the north. Fighting this I must have veered away from the winds.

It is now getting dark, the Sun dropping below the horizon earlier and faster every day. I should have been there, or at least nearby, an hour or more ago. I make for shadowy shapes that I hope are trees, swearing at the toboggan, which feels more and more like nothing but dead weight.

And then I see a light, waving and blinking through the blowing snow. Not too distant, I think. I try shouting, but doubt that I am heard. Still wrestling with the toboggan, wax on my skis no longer gaining me much purchase, I fight my way through small patches of pine, limbs all pointing in one direction from flagging, trying their best to impale me as I slip and slide.

Now I can hear dogs barking, yips and moans and howls coming in brief snatches through the wind. Exhausted, I stop and tie the toboggan to a tree, anxiously wrap the yellow nylon rope

tears open the side of his head...

around a high branch, then kick off my skis and stand them up next to it, quickly remove my ski boots and slide my numbing feet into my Sorels.

I mark my position with the GPS, and then I march toward the light, listening to the dogs.

THE LIGHT HAS DISAPPEARED. I HAVE BEEN WALKING IN WHAT I HOPE IS AN EVER-SHRINKING CIRCLE FOR THE PAST HALF-HOUR OR SO, BUT even that is no guarantee. The cold has affected the batteries and the LCD in the GPS unit, and my last glance at it provided only a blank screen, black draining in a tiny pool in one corner. It should have stayed warm in my pocket, but like everything else, it isn't working for me anymore

I stop and scan for any sign of horizon, but I see nothing but black and white; in close, distant, who can tell? Too damn stubborn to lie down and succumb, I trudge onward.

THE LIGHT AGAIN, THIS TIME SITTING STILL, ACCOMPANIED BY THE SOUND OF MORE DOGS AND BY THE REPORT OF A rifle shot. I hurry toward the sound, falling once but catching myself before planting my face in the hard snow, getting back up as quickly as I can.

The light proves to be an oil lamp, sitting on the ground. I move out of the wind and into a pocket of relative calm, no snow blowing and seemingly less on the ground. Dogs can still be heard in the distance, but I see none. No sign either of who owns the lamp or who fired the shot

I stand for a moment, staring at the lamp, bewildered by both the sudden change in weather and by this light, sitting alone in the middle of nothing. And then I hear a sound behind me, and I turn.

He's a large man, taller than me by a head, broad at the shoulders, dressed in fur and wearing mukluks. He is carrying a rifle, cradling it really, and there are tears in his eyes, glistening in the light of the oil lamp. Long blond hair sticks out from beneath his hood and his slight beard is moist with half-frozen tears and snot

Before I can say anything he hefts the rifle, points it straight into the air, pulls the trigger. The blast sets the distant dogs to barking again and the man joins them in a howl that sounds so much of pain and loss that my gut, even my bowels, tighten up into a desperate knot.

"Joe!" he yells holding the rifle close to his chest again. His accent sounds Scandinavian. "Help me, Joe! Joe!" The last time he shouts this name he drags it out, turns it into another howl to join the unseen dogs

I stagger over to him, sure now that I am witnessing someone despondent over something, drunk perhaps, suicidal for sure. "Hey!" I yell thinking maybe I can redirect his thoughts by getting him to help me. "Can you help me?"

He looks up from staring at his rifle, looks me straight in the eyes. Then he whispers. "Oh, Boris, I miss you so. I'm so sorry that I wasn't there." He sobs, wipes snot away from his nose, turning his sleeve stiff and shiny as it freezes. "Murdering bastard," he growls, and lifts the rifle again

I move to stop him, try to push the gun to the side, but without even looking at me he pushes me away and as I slip on the snow he slides his mouth over the barrel. "No!" I yell, rolling and scrambling to my feet and as I rush toward him he looks me in the eyes again, this time his own eyes go wide just as he pulls the trigger

The roar of the rifle is muted and I watch helplessly as the bullet tears open the side of his head, his jaw and cheek and ear vaporizing in a spray of blood and flesh and bone. The rifle slips from his hands and he slowly tumbles backward, falling to the snow with his arms spread wide. Bits of brain hang from his skull, and the snow there is almost black with the lamp sitting on the ground on the other side of him.

"Jesus," I say, and go to see if he's dead, although there can be no doubt, and then the pocket of calm disappears and the storm moves in again, and just like that I can see nothing more than my hand in front of my face, and the lamp seems to have been blown out with this latest gust. I walk 10 paces, know that I have gone too far, stop and pull out my flashlight. It only helps to light up snowflakes whipping by at right angles to the ground.

I stagger like this for what seems to be more than an hour, sheen of sweat building into layers of ice on my face, hands and then feet slowly deadening with the cold. Finally I can go no farther, and I sit on the snow, wondering how long I'll have until hypothermia begins to settle in. A part of my mind views this situation with analytical detachment, going over what I can expect.

The exertion I've gone through has warmed me, but in the process has pulled heat away from my core. Sweat freezes and stays frozen now, chilling me even more. Soon I know my core temperature will plummet, a degree Fahrenheit every half-hour or so. Two hours to partial amnesia, another hour to apathy, 30 more minutes to a stupor. Two hours after that I'll stop this infernal shivering, and all of my organs apart from my kidneys will begin preparing to shut down. Another two hours and my heartbeat will become irregular, and then 30 minutes after that I may feel like I'm burning, so much that I'll begin to strip off my clothes to escape the flames and heat.

You don't venture to the Arctic for a year without doing preparatory reading. Thank God I'm still lucid enough to entertain myself, I think, and give a frantic little chuckle in time with my shivering.

I close my eyes, keep them so for minutes, perhaps longer. I picture my Grandpa fighting weather like this and winning, tough old bastard not knowing how to give up. Probably a shit-load smarter than his grandson, though.

The dogs again, howling and barking. And closer this time.

I try to open my eyes but they are crusted shut. It won't help the situation, but I peel off one mitt to wipe away the ice and snow, not even feeling the cold on my hand now. Both eyes open now, I see that I'm in another strange weather pocket, that the blowing snow has disappeared once again. And there is another lamp, this one bouncing through the air as someone carries it.

A yell for help comes out as a croak, and so I force myself up to my butt, not sure when I ended up lying on my side, then slowly push up to my knees, then standing, balancing with my still-ungloved hand. I cast about for the mitt for several seconds, knowing I'll need it, forgetting it is clipped to my sleeve. When I finally find it and painfully slip it back over my hand, the light has stopped moving, not more than 20 feet away.

I can see now as I approach that there are two; smaller one holding the lamp while the other looks at the body of the Scandinavian who killed himself. I drop to my knees beside his body, directly across from them. "Please help," I whisper.

"He's still alive, Pete," says the larger man. "I don't know how, but we can't leave him out here. Go get a sled so you can give me a hand getting him back to the cabin."

Pete, I see, is young, just barely a teenager. His eyes are wide with fright, but he nods his head and turns to run, carrying the pool of light away with him.

"I'm dying," he whispers... "Sit with

"Pete's a good son," says the man, barely visible now. "Works well on the lines, big help with chores around the cabin. Too young for this, though."

I nod, unable to speak.

"He liked Boris. Cried all night after the constable came by on his sled and told us he'd been shot by Skinner. Wish they'd catch that son of a bitch.

The light comes bouncing back now, Pete pulling a sled behind him. Dogs still bark, somewhere in the distance.

"Good," says the man, standing. "Let's get him on it and back to the cabin."

Feeling grateful, I stand, but before I can take one step toward the sled the two of them are bending over and picking up the body of the Scandinavian. They gently lower him onto a bed of pelts, then Pete grabs the lamp and his father grabs the rifle and they start pulling the sled.

Shocked, I stand there for a second, blinking as I watch them begin to fade into the inky blackness. But only for a second, and then I am stumbling along behind them, trying mightily to raise my voice above a whisper, desperate for help and to know why they are ignoring me.

The sled appears heavy, and even in my condition I am soon able to pass them. I step in front of the older man, but he does not acknowledge me, just pushes me to the side like he knows I am there but is unable to see me. Like the Scandinavian did to me.

By now something is tickling the back of my mind, something that I know is there, but I can't find it, can't work my way through the fog of intense cold and desperate need. I try two more times to get the man's attention, once his son's, getting the same result each attempt. Bewildered by their reactions, I resort to just following, leaning on the back of the sled for support and to make sure I don't close my eyes for even a few seconds and lose track of them.

Soon we are at a small cabin, smoke drifting from a small chimney pipe, warm glow of light shining through a few badly sealed cracks in the wall. I can still hear the dogs, but none appears to my sight.

Pete opens the door and lays the lamp on the floor, just off to the side. Then he comes back and takes the Scandinavian's legs, and he and his father heft the man's body into the cabin and lay it on a bedroll. Addled as my brain may be, I am not willing to let this opportunity go by, and so I step through the door just behind them, watch as Pete steps around me without acknowledging my presence to close it.

Blessed warmth! I pay no more attention to my companions or my surroundings, instead get as close as I can to the cook stove that sits in the center of the single room, painfully peel off each mitt and hold my raw, blistered hands so close that I am almost touching the metal. My shivering attacks with renewed force, and I can hear myself emitting a steady stream of hoarse nonsense syllables; "Buh-buh-buh-fuh-fuh-fuh-vuh-vuh-vuh-kuh-kuh-kuh," and on, unable to control myself. I feel a desperate need to piss, overload on my kidneys from my surface blood vessels constricting and forcing fluids toward the center of my body in a last-ditch effort to retain my core temperature. But I squint and with an effort hold it back, not wanting to wet myself until I know whether or not I am in the midst of a hypothermic hallucination.

I hear noise, wrenching me back to this strange world I find myself in. Now that they have placed him on the floor, the Scandinavian has miraculously sprung to life, screaming in agony and twisting his body this way and that, shouting unintelligible words to the air, eyes delirious and unseeing.

It is all the father can do to hold him down. "Pete," he yells, "Get me the medicine bag!"

The boy jumps to obey, grabs a caribou-hide bag from beside a small pile of pelts. He delivers it, obviously frightened, and then his father directs him to get a pot and melt some snow. This he does as well, stepping outside for a few seconds and then coming in, once again stepping around me like he knows I'm there but can't let me in on the secret. The snow quickly melts on the hot stove, and then Pete puts on one of his mitts and carries it over to where the Scandinavian is still thrashing about.

"Swede!" yells the father. Part of me smiles at the obvious name. "You're hurt bad, Swede, and I don't know if I can do anythin' to help. But I gotta try!" He pulls a small red-tinged bottle from the bag, whispers "I'm sorry" and pulls the cap off with his teeth, still manhandling Swede to try to keep him in place. Then he pulls some cotton from the bag, and pours the liquid onto it. Iodine. He dips this cotton into the water, then swabs Swede's wound with it, rubs it around the edges of the wound first, then replenishes it and daubs it directly onto the man's leaking brains.

The ensuing screams and howls of protest are worse than I would have guessed possible for a man at death's door. He jumps and thrashes with renewed vigor, crying and moaning and shouting to God. The father calls for his son to bring whiskey and a bottle is fetched, and with some effort he manages to pour some down Swede's throat.

Eventually, stepping in time to my warming, Swede settles into a fitful, painful sleep. He lies there mumbling, twisting his arms or his body now and again, but still enough that the father can step away from him and take a drink himself.

I'm sitting now, head leaning forward as I fight off exhaustion. So tired that I almost miss the next thing the father says.

"You'll have to go get Walker."

It sinks in, and my head snaps up. I stare at him, trying to decipher if I heard what I think I did.

Pete shakes his head. "Uh-uh. I ain't goin'."

"You have to. We'll need a witness for when the constable can come up."

"Nothin' doin'."

His father stands up, looks down at Swede. "It's eight miles to their cabin. If you won't go, then I'll do it."

Pete's eyes are wide with fear now. "Uh-uh. I ain't stayin'."

His father runs his hand through his hair. I can see him fighting to be reasonable with a scared boy, but angry that he can't do more. "All right, then. We'll hitch up the dogs and both go. You get out there and get them ready while I try to clean up a touch."

Pete dresses himself for the weather and is out the door in a shot. I try to watch the father as he wipes things up and then stokes up the fire, but the heat and the ordeal are making me drowsy. I feel my head tilt forward, and then lose sense of time.

I HEAR THE DOOR OF THE CABIN SLAM SHUT, START AWAKE REALIZING THAT THEY MUST BE LEAVING. DOGS ARE BARKING again, this time with excitement. I'm sure they are going to my cabin, or near it, and so I jump and go to the door, wrestling into my mitts, hoping they can give me a ride back.

A hand grabs my ankle, and I stop mid-stride. Looking down, I see that Swede has a hold of me.

"I'm dying," he whispers, the damage done by the bullet making him barely intelligible; I can see his tongue flapping behind the hole in his cheek. "Sit with me, angel. Keep me company."

I don't know what to say or do for several seconds, but the reced-

ing sound of the dogs snaps me out of it. "What did you call me?"

He moans. "Angel. I saw you just before I pulled the trigger, when you weren't there before. God sent you," he inhales, shuddering. "God sent you to stop me. Too late. My fault. Please sit with me while I die."

Stunned, I sit on the floor.

"Talk to me," he whispers, eyes rolling back so he can see me.

"About what?" Foolish question, but I feel at a complete loss about what to do right now.

"Heaven." He tries to smile.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, Swede. I don't know anything about Heaven. I'm not an angel, I'm just a man who got lost in the Arctic. I thought I was going to die."

He grunts. "Angel, man. My fault for not seeing you." He starts to cry now, sobbing like a child feeling true loss for the first time. "I'm sorry, Boris. I should have been there, shot him before he shot you."

One last breath, and then he's still.

And God help me, I still have to piss. But I'm deathly afraid to leave this cabin, afraid I won't be able to get back in. Gingerly, I remove Swede's hand from where it remains lying on my foot, stand up and sway unsteadily for a moment, then spot the piss-can over on a stump in a corner.

This operation takes more energy than I would have imagined, and so when done, I add more wood to the fire and then curl up on the floor.

THE DOOR SLAMS OPEN, LETTING COLD AND DAYLIGHT INTO THE CABIN. I ROLL OVER AND SIT UP TOO FAST, MY HEAD swimming. "Jesus, the stove's still hot," says the first one in the door, Pete's father. Pete is right behind him, and then two other men, both slowly peeling off their winter gear as they stare down at Swede's body.

"He's dead for sure, now," says the taller of the two. He pulls back his hood and unwraps his scarf, and I blink, thinking, *It can't be.*

The slighter one behind him does the same, and I gasp, knowing him not only from pictures, but from an older face, one that stood the tests of time for longer than this one. Matt Walker.

Grandpa.

He looks to the other man, obviously Mike Walker, his father, my great-grandfather. A man who died years before I was born. "What now?"

Mike, Great-Grandpa, looks to Pete's father. "What do you think, Joe? Ground's frozen, we can't plant the sorry S.O.B. But you sure as hell don't want him in here getting higher than week-old caribou."

Joe, obviously Joe March, scratches his head. "Guess we gotta leave him outside 'til the snow melts. I got an old tarp we can sling over him."

"Cover that with spruce boughs," says Grandpa. If I recall correctly, he's only about 21 right now. "Keep the smell down so the dogs won't go after him."

"Same's the wild animals," says Joe.

"The dogs will try to eat him?" asks Pete. He looks concerned by this.

"Sure," says Mike. "It's just meat for them. And if it's high, hell, they like it even better."

"This his bedroll?' asks Grandpa, toeing the blanket Swede's body is lying on. Joe nods. "Good. Let's wrap him in this and take him out, get this started."

All four bend down to do the work, and I hurry to pull on my hat and mitts, follow them as they walk out into the sunlight. About noon, Sun at about 20 degrees over the horizon. It seems unbearably bright, but I can't find my sunglasses.

"Where?" asks Grandpa. Joe gestures to a spot near some trees, and we all head to where he points. I walk beside Grandpa.

"You know," I say, knowing he can't hear me but wanting to speak with him one last time, "I couldn't be there at the hospital when you died. Stuck in a stupid fucking meeting in another city, nobody even told me you were so sick." I shake my head. "You were good to me. Fair. I learned a lot just hanging around you, more than I thought I ever learned." I smile. "Hell, you're no less talkative right now than you usually were, and yet somehow it all got through."

They lay the body on the ground, Grandpa and Pete kicking snow over it. Joe runs back to the cabin to get the old tarp, and Mike cuts down some boughs with a knife from his belt. When the body's properly covered, they all stand in silence for a moment, hoods off and hats in hands. I bare my head as well, wincing at the cold nipping at my frozen ears.

After about a minute, Joe speaks. "Goddamn if I won't miss him and Boris," he says.

The others nod their heads and follow this statement with "Amen" and "Yup." Then Joe pulls a bottle from his pocket and takes a pull before passing it on. Even Pete has a drink, albeit a small one. Finally, all four gather small stones, Grandpa piling them into a small marker at the head. A cairn. "This'll keep until we can do something more permanent," he says.

They head back down to the cabin then, me still walking beside Grandpa. "Stay a spell?" asks Joe.

Mike shakes his head. "Don't think so, thanks. I have to get back out onto the line, and Matt needs to run some pelts down to Reliance."

"I'll take word about Swede to the detachment there," says Grandpa. "Talk to Constable Marquardt if he's back from hunting down Skinner."

Joe nods. He and Pete shake hands with Grandpa and Great-Grandpa Mike, and I'm almost caught off-guard, they board their dogsleds so quickly. I run over and swing myself onto Grandpa's sled, settle back and wrap my scarf around my face to fight off the wind.

The dogs are running fast, knowing they'll be fed when they get back. I lean back on one arm, watch Grandpa as he steers the sled, yelling at the dogs, pushing off with one leg or leaning his body out to keep the sled upright.

The weather stays fair, and we are back at Grandpa's camp by twilight. The two of them ease their sleds up alongside the cabin, and I slowly stand up, unsure now of what I'm seeing. Their cabin is there, but overlapping it is mine, slightly smaller, door in a different position.

I turn to look, but already Mike, my great-grandfather, is fading from view, bending down to unleash now-invisible dogs. I turn to Grandpa, see that he is flickering from sight as well.

Tears in my eyes, I go and stand in front of him, look at his face as he concentrates on loosing his dogs.

"I'm sorry, Grandpa," I say. "I'm sorry I wasn't there. I loved… I love you very much."

He stops, stands and whistles at his dogs, then turns and looks me right in the eye.

"I know," he says with a grin, then fades from view.

I stand and look out on the lake for a long while, then enter my cabin to start up a fire and get something to eat.

MYTHS ALIVE

in the Art of Mark Wagner

BY TERRI WIELDING

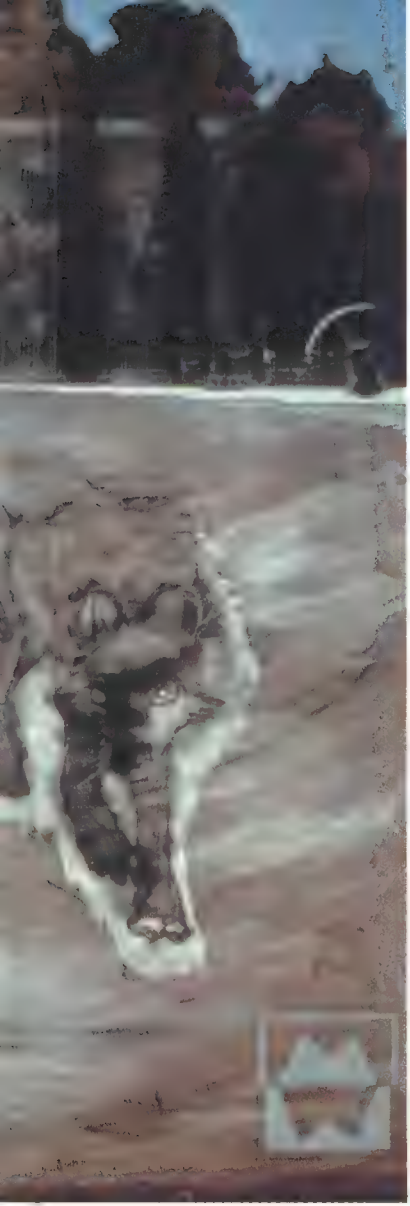
THERE IS A romantic idea that myth comes from the people," writes the great mythologist Joseph Campbell. "It doesn't; it comes from the teacher, the shaman and visionary as the giver and interpreter of myth. The visionary translates what he sees into an art or ritual form. Myth must be kept alive. The people who can keep it alive are the artists of one kind or another. The function of the artist is the mythologization of the environment and the world."

Mark Wagner is an artist who has dedicated his life to keeping myth alive in magical art that fairly dances off the page with its crackling energy. Unlike many fantasy painters, focused

ABOVE: *"Homage To A Dog Soldier" is full of angular and hiding images, easily missed upon first glance.* RIGHT, TOP: *A winged guardian soars through the heavens in "Shaman's Tears."* RIGHT, BOTTOM: *"Union" uses shadow and light to evoke the pensive feeling of an angel looking down upon the world.*

on Celtic tales and medieval imagery, Mark's work is inspired by ancient stories from cultures all around the world—including the myths beneath our feet in the bones of the American landscape. To Mark (as to Joseph Campbell), these myths are not quaint relics of the distant past, but vibrant tales still relevant to modern art and modern life. "Life is a wheel," he says. "The spokes are religion, science, mythology, psychology and the various healing disciplines. Art is the hub. Art is the magic that brings these things together. Then some magical force moves the wheel, like evolution, and art is created out of the movement and it holds everything together."

Mark was born in Pennsylvania and grew up in Amish farm country, where he spent a great deal of his childhood in the woods along the Susquehanna River. He studied at New York's Pratt Institute, graduating cum laude with a BFA in illustration. He received a grant from the NEA to explore computer-generated imagery and drew illustrations of prehistoric bones for the Museum of Natural History. In 1982, he moved to New Mexico to live "the classic starving artist life." Surrounded by mountains, desert skies, and the rich indigenous cultures of the West, his work underwent a profound change, rooting itself in the magic of the land: Native American rituals, Hispanic art and myths, and the transplanted legends of peoples who came to this land from around the world. Mark's paintings began to explore the vital connec-



tion between humankind and the earth—particularly as this is expressed in shamanic stories told the world over.

The shaman is a figure we find represented in our earliest art: painted on cave walls, carved out of stone, molded into vessels of clay. He is the intermediary between men and women, nature, and the spirit world—as well as a shape-changer, a trickster, an embodiment of creative powers. The shaman is often portrayed in shape-shifting guise as part-bird or part-animal; or else (like the Celtic Cernunnos) as a "horned man" with branching antlers.

"Shamanism," wrote Mircea Eliades (in his classic study, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*), "is a religious phenomenon characteristic of Siberian and Ural-Altaic people; the word shaman itself is Tungus in origin. But shamanism must not

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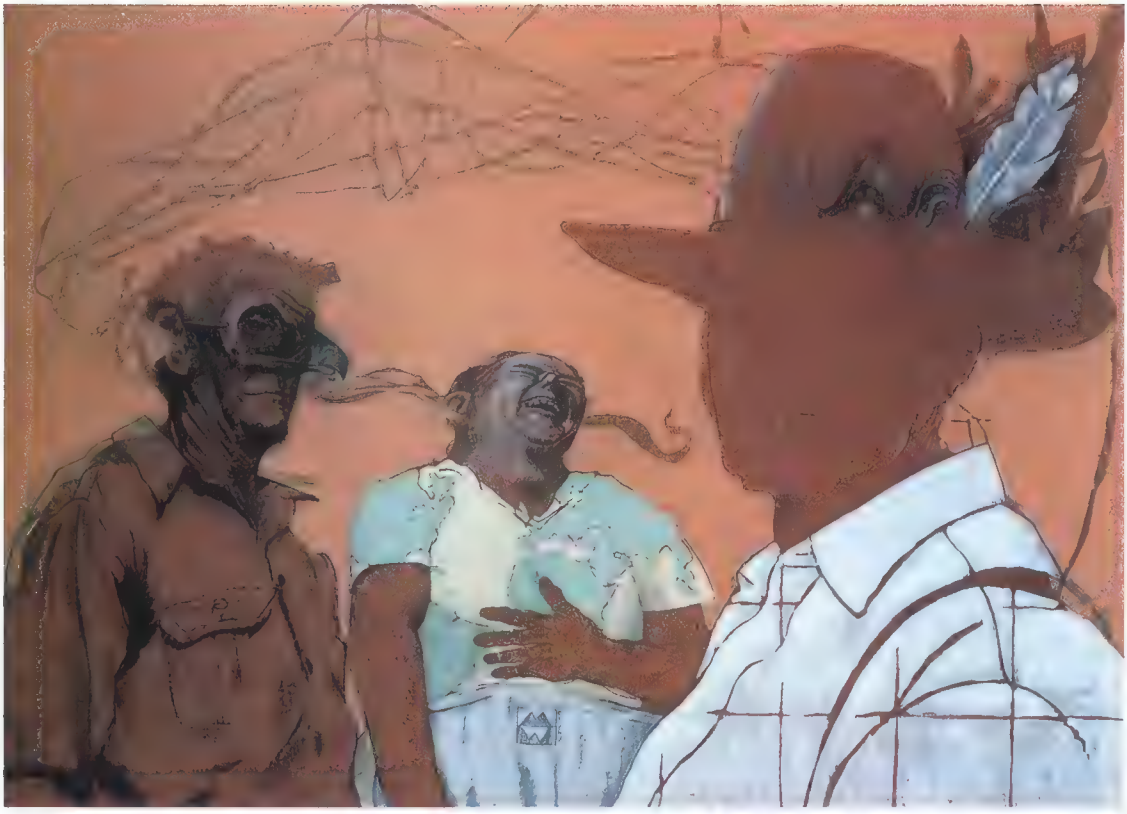

be considered limited to those countries. It is encountered, for example, in southeast Asia, Oceania, and among many South and North American aboriginal tribes."

Through chanting, dance and ritual the shaman communicates with spirits unseen, and brings their "medicine" (wisdom, warnings, healing and oracular powers) back to the human realm. Most ancient cultures (including Caucasian cultures of Europe, such as the Norse and Celtic tribes) had men and women to perform this mystical role: sibyls, seers, sorcerers, medicine men and wise-women, yogi, priests, hermits, artists… visionaries of many kinds. In some ancient lands shamans walked a thin line between wisdom and madness, one foot in the human world, and one in the world beyond. In general the shamanic calling was never one to be taken lightly, for training and initiation was arduous, often dangerous—commonly involving a time of isolation in the wilderness, feats of physical endurance, or ritual death and resurrection. Siberian shamans were said to leave their flesh behind during the initiatory trance, descending into the land of death to learn to clothe their bones in new skin; through this ordeal they learned the intimate workings of the human body.

The wizard Merlin is a shamanic figure found in Welsh Arthurian lore; according to ancient texts Merlin went mad after the Battle of Arderydd, living like a beast in the wood, and only after this complete retreat into nature did he gain his "magic": a deep understanding of nature, of animal life, and oracular wisdom. For the North American people known as the Yaqui (called the Yoeme in their own tongue) the "deer dancer" is a man who takes on the movements and consciousness of the deer; dancing through all-night rituals he is able to enter the Flower World that lies beyond the human sphere—a mystical place, but one dangerous to linger in too long.

Various other rites still practiced in cultures around the world today retain elements of the initiatory process—particularly, on this continent, in Native American ceremonies where feats of physical endurance (and individual retreats into nature) are acts of prayer, a means of communication with Mother Earth. After moving West, Mark participated in the ritual life of its mixed cultures—and then brought visionary experience back from the wilderness into the studio, turning Art itself into prayer and Storytelling into ceremony. His paintings are rich with imagery inspired by these ancient ways and the animistic beliefs of many lands: totem animals and pic-

Continued on page 81

ABOVE: *Wagner used acrylics and pencils to create "Mysteries of the Laughing Earth."* LEFT: *"The Stopping of Time" is just one of many Wagner paintings inspired by ancient imagery and beliefs.*

ALTHOUGH HE WAS A STONE AT HEIST, MARTIN ZACK SAID, "OH GOD. I NEED A MIRACLE." The angel sat down beside him at the blackjack table.

"Hey, Martin. Kinda late, isn't it? Or should I say, kinda early?"

The dealer, a bored-looking Asian man with tag appended to white shirt saying, 'Hi. I'm Chang from Taiwan. Let's party!' looked annoyed and rapped the table for Martin Zack's attention. Zack blinked at the wings and the robes and the wild streaming hair of the angel. Then he said, "Just a sec, huh?" He turned back to the hand he'd just been dealt.

A king and a 5. Dealer showing a 10 up.

"Fuck," he said between his teeth. The casinos he liked would let him surrender and duck out with half his money. But he was in the Glitter Casino, the bottom of the downtown barrel, the only place in Vegas with dollar blackjack and quarter craps ... and the only place he could count on where they would keep the drinks coming.

And man, he could use a stiff one about right now.

He took a pull on his Bud and thought about it.

Then he turned to the angel.

"Odds are whatever I do, I get screwed. So what do you think?"

"Aggressive experts would hit," said the angel. "But with so little riding on the bet, I'd say stay."

Martin shrugged. He swiped the dirty green felt of the table with his palm and then watched as the dealer turned over his down card.

Six! The fucker had to take another, even though he'd beaten him. Rules.

The dealer dealt another card from the two decks he held in his slender fingers.

Queen. Ten points! Sixteen plus 10 equaled 26. Five points over 21, equaled bust!

The dealer quickly clicked out four silver chips beside the ones that Martin had bet.

Martin pulled them in.

He pulled his coat on, drained his beer, and then looked at the angel.

"You wish to play more?" said Chang in broken English.

"Uh ... do you see anyone standing beside me?" said Martin.

Chang lifted an eyebrow. He shook his head.

"I didn't think so." Martin looked at the angel. "You wanna drink?"

"Yes. But I can't stay long."

"I'm buyin'."

MARTIN LED THE ANGEL ACROSS THE faded red rug of the casino floor to the long wood bar beside the gaming tables. Around them clanged the eternal sounds of the slot machines. Ching ching ching. Mechanical ditties and clashes of coins hitting aprons especially designed to announce to the world that here was another Vegas winner, yes sir. The air smelled of years of cigarettes and spilled 50 cent shrimp cocktails.

Although it was 6:30 in the morning, it could have been 3 in the afternoon, or midnight for all the atmosphere was concerned. Here was the taste of luck, the feel of success just around that spin of the roulette wheel or the flip of that pai gow poker card.

Martin sat on a stool and ordered a shot of house whiskey with a beer chaser. He got the angel a Seven & Seven.

On the stage to one side of the bar, a five-piece band was doing some creepy seventies disco number. They'd done the same one last night about this time. Martin turned his back to the by-the-numbers red-eyed soul music, and got down to business.

"Man, I'm down to my last 40 bucks. I take it this appearance means that my luck's gonna change, right?"

The angel sipped thoughtfully at his Seven-Up and Seagram's. "That could be."

Martin slapped the top of the bar. "Yes! I knew it! I knew if I could just hang on long enough." He put a familiar hand on the angel's shoulder. Wing feathers brushed his hand. They had a soft strength to them. They felt more real than love. "You see, even though I know theoretically that the house has a one- or two-percent edge and statistics can grind you down here ... It don't work like that. Not really. You look at the cards. They swing. It's like chaos theory, man. Even in what looks random, there's a pattern. And now I'm gonna hit that run ... Man, I can pay off the fuckin' collection companies. I can maybe start up my RV business again ... And you know, with the retirement rate about to go up again, RVs are gonna be big ... Maybe even Peg and the kids will wanna come back ... "He turned away from the angel, hope blooming like a beautiful garden in him. He looked down at the shot glass and the

A Ghost of a Chance

BY DAVID BISCHOFF

Illustration by Patrick Arrasmith

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Budweiser. He knocked down the astringent bad whiskey and washed the taste out of his mouth with the cold, thin beer. "And this stuff … I'm goin' off it. I swear. Fuck, with luck on my side again, I won't need it!"

"That's good to hear, Martin. Perhaps AA might help."

"Alcoholics Anonymous?" Martin snorted. "Fuckin' religion. I can stop on my own. Shit, if I had money, I'd just do an outpatient clinic or something like that. It'll be so easy … with luck! With just a string of luck! Bad luck just can't keep on happening, right? Life's just like cards! Just like fuckin' blackjack!"

The angel reached into his robes.

He pulled out two decks of cards and riffle-cut them.

Then he offered a plastic cut card to Martin, who automatically stuck it in the middle of two decks.

Then the angel dealt Martin a 10, himself an Ace up. Then Martin received a Jack, and the angel deftly slipped his down card beneath the Ace.

"Insurance?" asked the angel.

"Hell no."

The angel nodded. "Now then. Tell me what you've seen here."

"Well, I got a 20 and I'll take it!"

"No, no. Think about this. You've made some assumptions already."

"Insurance never really pays off."

"More than that, Martin."

Annoyed, Martin took a pull on his beer. "Shit. What are you talking about?"

"What's the principle behind card-counting, Martin?"

"Hmm? Oh. I don't count cards … but if I see a lot of low cards come up, I try to bet heavier."

"Exactly. A lot of high cards in the deck work in the players' favor. Now, I've just pulled out two decks from my robes. You're assuming they're just normal cards, first of all. Second of all, you're assuming that I didn't deal from the bottom, middle of the deck for that last card of mine … or even held a top card for myself …." The angel pulled the card out, turned it over. It was a 10 of Hearts. "You lose. Dealers in Vegas DO get an amazing percentage of just the right hands, don't they?"

Martin blinked. "What? You're tellin' me that the house cheats?"

The angel shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe sometimes they do … Sometimes they figure it's not worth it. Depends, I'd say."

"Naw. Man, that would be stupid. They'd get caught … Whole place would come down!"

The angel sighed. "On my way here, I happened to look down at the Strip. The Luxor, the MGM Grand, that new New York, New York eyesore. The lights, the life, in the middle of nowhere. And Martin, I'm thinking to myself … Hmmm. It's interesting to think that someone could come here and see all this and think … 'I'm going to win money here!'"

"Hey! I've won lots of money here!"

"Easy to win, Martin. Hard to keep."

"Look, I don't want to hear this." He pointed out at the tables. Even this early, the quarter craps table was packed with worn men in seedy coats and stubble beards, staring down at the action with desperate fascination. "You're telling me that it's worth cheating here for this paltry action?"

The angel collected the cards.

He did a thorough Vegas shuffle.

Then he dealt four Aces in succession from the top of the deck.

From the bottom, he slapped a 10 on each of these.

"The establishments in which you place your faith, Martin, are rather curious."

"Thanks. You know, I've seen magic tricks before. I've seen card tricks too." He looked over at the pit. An old nasty-looking man with a polyester coat and a smudged tie hanging over a pot belly was walking around, watching the proceedings. "You're telling me the little UN delegation over there is flim-flamming?" He finished his beer. "Uh uh. Thanks for the advice. I'll just take my luck and my money and play it the way I want."

"Just as you wish, Martin. And thank you for the drink."

Martin headed for the $5-minimum table.

There was a Latin-looking sort with black slicked-back hair. He wore a black vest over his white shirt. He had a tag stating, "Hi. I'm Miguel. Let's party."

He had that same weary resignation in his eyes that Martin had seen in so many other dealers here in Vegas, whether at the Pioneer or the fuckin' white tigers at Siegheil's and Boy-Toy's down the strip. Martin didn't see no card-shark gleam in those foreign eyes, no deftness in those thick worn digits.

He parked his drink, got out his chips. He had the guy all to himself, which was in his favor. These bozos here, you get 'em all to yourself, they try to hurry you up so you couldn't think straight. That didn't bother Martin. He wouldn't let this wetback fuck with him!

"SO MIGUEL," HE SAID, WITH A WAN SMILE. "I'M here for that party!"

Miguel gave a professional smile. Martin stuck in a $5 chip. Let's believe in luck, sure, he thought blearily. But let's take it easy.

The cards came out twhick thwick, thwick thwick.

Martin almost choked on his beer.

Fucking two Aces on his side.

Dealer showing a 5.

Pairs like that you split, 'cos all you needed on top of an ace was a 10-spot and you were 21 fuckin' golden!

He didn't even tell Miguel what he was doing, it was so damned obvious. Eagerly,

he pulled the Ace of Hearts off the Ace of Spades, showed the down card, and stuck out another $5 chip.

Dealer dealt onto the first pile.

"Jesus Christ!" said Martin out loud.

Another Ace!

Looking around to see if any new mythological figures had shown up, but finding no one to his side (the angel was over at one of the slots, pumping in quarters) he fished out another five and split again. Man! Amazing.

The next card:

Ace of Clubs.

"Split again, mister?" said Miguel, actually starting to take interest in the proceedings.

"You're damned right!"

Over went another card.

It was another Ace!

"I feel a miracle, buddy," said Martin. "A great big goddamned miracle!"

More splits. More Aces.

Martin was out of money, but he was already feeling excitement building in him.

Eight fuckin' Aces in a row! God bless six-deck blackjack.

"Okay. Let's see what we've got now," said Martin.

Miguel slipped the first card from the shoe.

Nine. Which gave him 20.

That was strong ... Powerful. That would do.

The next was an 8. That would do too. No need for another hit.

Then ... fuck.

Another 9.

And an 8 ...

Eight. Nines.

Nineteens and 20s.

Strong! Real strong!

Martin took a drink of warm Bud and licked his lips.

"Okay buddy. Let's see that bust now!"

The pit boss had gotten interested and now he was over, looking at the proceedings, digging something out of his teeth with his little finger.

Dealer turned over a 2, giving him seven points.

Great. He was bound to hit 10 next card! There hadn't been a 10-spot in a coon's age ... bound to turn up ...

No. A 3 ...

And then another 3!

Thirteen in all.

Man, the odds were so strong the dealer was going to bust, Martin was almost going to bust.

It had to be a 10!

Every fucking time he got a 5 up, the next card would be a 15. Fifteen! He fuckin' hated 15s. A 13 was poison to the house, though!

Poison!

And even if Miguel turned over a 3, he'd be in bad shape ... and a 4 or a 5 would be good too, 'cos he'd have to stick.

Martin could feel sweat starting to seep out of his forehead.

He could feel that fuckin' miracle creeping up from his short hairs, like a sweet and true and right orgasm.

The dealer dealt himself another card.

Eight.

Without saying a word, the dealer swept up Martin's chips.

Martin just stared down, aghast.

The dealer didn't say a thing.

Expressionless, he assumed his half-attentive, at-ease position.

Want to party some more, mister? Actually, I really don't give a shit burrito.

His 40 bucks!

His last fuckin' 40 bucks gone, like wfffffft! Like it had never, ever existed!

Martin shook his head. He felt as though his heart had stopped. Then he realized that he'd stopped breathing. He dragged in a ragged gasp and almost fainted.

He held himself against the table.

The pit boss, examining something green he'd pulled off his teeth, sauntered back over to the middle table.

Martin turned and looked back over to where the angel had been at the slots.

He saw just a blur of wings, heading out the revolving door.

"No!" he cried. "No!"

Through the whirl and churl of the one-armed bandits and the sluggish whine of "Stayin' Alive" from the band, and the sour of just-cleaned-up 40-proof vomit, Martin hurled himself toward the exit doors.

Outside, he got a blast of cool desert air.

He saw a trailing of robes, and the flap of huge, numinous wings.

"No!" he cried.

With all his might he ran up and leaped.

He caught both legs just above the sandals, and hung on with a death grip.

The winged being had to flap harder to keep from crashing back down to the pavement.

"Where's my miracle!" screamed Martin. "Where's my fuckin' miracle, goddammit!"

Still flapping, the angel managed to turn around. He looked down at Martin sadly.

"You know, Martin. I knew Jacob. And Martin. You're no Jacob, pal."

Somehow, the angel reached down and pulled Martin up. Martin smelled strength and power and stars. He felt ages of thought and the resonance of prayer and searching and tears questing for truth.

The angel set him down on the pavement and gently pried away his fingers.

Martin was sobbing. "My miracle. Where's my miracle!"

The angel's voice was the delicate trembling of lightning. "Think about it, Martin. Think about it."

Then, with a rush of more than flight and the smell of raw and sacred instinct, the angel flew away over the neon lights, pale now against the gentle violence of the desert dawn.❧

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CONSPIRACY

Continued from page 55

angry, something massive as the sky? Something overwhelming as a night of cold stars over the finally empty parking lot of Burly Bob's Bar and Grill? Something lonely and howling like the disinfected white walls of the doctors' offices?

It was coming. It was rushing from some great impossible distance and down that pipe and coming right at her and her baby. And she held Baby Tuckoo tightly and waited, waited, because what else could she do?

The dragon: a serpent with coils moving up and down like the great cycles of relentless time. A serpent, rushing in a continuous, dark, eternal movement: It was coming! It was coming over large primordial stretches older than man, or woman, vaster than empty space! It was coming for her and for Baby Tuckoo.

The dragon! The pipes were no longer merely tight against its body. They were pressing it onward, moving it on, letting it gain momentum. And the mighty dragon willed itself forward, its eyes fixed upon them there at the end of the pipe, huddling at the end of the pipe, like that Pietà, blue with their mortality. It slashed forward, willing itself on, and its will made it mighty and its will made it strong and its will to do this filled the pipes with thunder. Its wings burst, began bursting at the seams, as its will pushed pushed pushed it through to the last of the system where lived the disease and the Nothing-that-could-be-done; it pushed faster, faster, knowing full well what awaited it, what waited at the end of the pipe when it ripped itself from the conditions of its existence. It willed itself on, now knowing full well the tools of those caduceus-serpents, and burst into that last moment and exploded out into the open air.

The dragon exploded. It was color. The dragon exploded and flashed into nothingness, leaving wild and brilliant colors, birds splashing and then fluttering into the air: the six indigo buntings, to be exact, and the painted one. For Baby Tuckoo. And for his mama.

And Baby Tuckoo was still too young to sit up and see, but the wild motion made his eyes flutter open and for that single wonmoment of a newborn's incomprehensible gaiety, his eyes danced. And his mama's, too; they flashed with dragon-spirit and reflected all the colors of those birds in a moment of sheer feeling—because joy only requires a single moment. Mama's eyes and baby's eyes reflected all the bird-colors and the cerulean blue of the wide sky, all the dancing shining feather-colors of the buntings fluttering fluttering fluttering at the end of the system, and then spiraling up to their new nests in the kudzu leaves on the roof of the outhouse, fluttering fluttering with the freedom of the air. ❧

BITTER CHIVALRY

Continued from page 47

His mind was as still as an undisturbed pool.

Sir Gerhadras rose from the dead, stone grinding against stone as he crawled from his tomb, metal clanking as he walked up out of the crypt to seek combat.

But he found Hormisdas kneeling by the window, without any armor or shield or weapon, only his crutch by his side.

"I will not fight you," said the young man. "You can kill me, but I will not fight, since you would take no comfort in your victory."

And, weeping, Sir Gerhadras put down his shield and his mace, and babbled out a thousand words at once, and finally managed to explain, amid his tears, that it was part of the curse that someone had to refuse to fight and be willing to die. Some other would have to lie in the tomb in his place for all the years he and Lady Amarylla might live. But it was the nature of the curse that he could not say any of this until his rescuer had already offered.

The two of them knelt together in prayer for a long time, then rose together and went to the tomb of the Lady Amarylla. Together they lifted the lid away and looked on her as she slept in death; and as they looked, her eyes opened and she clearly understood what had happened and knew what she must do.

She rose, and mixed a potion for Hormisdas to drink, which would let him sleep as if dead for as long as she and Gerhadras might live.

Hormisdas sipped of the potion, and said, "My quest is complete."

He was vaguely aware that the air was warmer already, as they lifted him into Gerhadras's tomb. He could smell the sweet scents of spring, even down here in the crypt, and perhaps he remarked on it, but his words were jumbled; and perhaps he commented that the knight carven on the lid looked as much like him as it did Gerhadras, and this could just as readily be his tomb, only that stone knight didn't have a crutch, so someone should carve one—

"You are whole and strong in your spirit," said Lady Amarylla.

Gerhadras placed the crutch inside the tomb with him and closed the lid.

Now the tale is not quite done. Hormisdas slept the sleep of death within the tomb, while Sir Gerhadras and Lady Amarylla returned to their lives, and the land was healed, somewhat, and the long winter indeed ended. But no comfort is complete upon this Earth; and it happened that the child Amarylla bore emerged, no son to Gerhadras, but to his enemy the Leper Knight.

And though the Leper Knight repented his sins, it did not matter. The evil was done. The evil was there.

The child grew. Gerhadras tried to treat him as his own son. They had many adventures together. There were times of happiness in the 20 years that passed, until the evil burst forth and the son killed his mother and stepfather and haunted the castle, consorting with demons.

All this while, Sir Hormisdas dreamed the dreams of the dead, and the ghosts of the Round Table knights came to him, telling of the dolorous day at Camlann, when Arthur and his own son Mordred were both slain and Camelot was no more.

Still Hormisdas slept. He did not awaken even when Gerhadras and Amarylla died. Possibly the lady had miscalculated. Possibly there was some counter potion she was supposed to administer, when she was very old and near to death, and it was never done. Possibly the quest was not quite complete after all.

The Leper Knight, seeking to redeem himself, slew the monster son at last, and the demons departed, leaving the castle an empty ruin. He never knew what happened to Sir Hormisdas, though he puzzled over the tomb on which was carven the image of a knight with a crutch. (The crutch was a later addition, the stone less weathered than the rest.)

Uncounted years passed before the leaking rain and shifting soil caused the tomb to fall apart.

It happened then that a young madman emerged from the forests of England, one who wore an old, rusty helmet and garments of leaves, who told how he'd met a Leper Knight on a bridge and knocked him into a stream with his crutch, but the Leper had recognized him at the last instant and died praising God, and his corpse, when it washed up miles downstream, was clean.

The story went on, of King Arthur and his knights and of the dolorous day at Camlann when the glory that was Camelot died in the mud. The madman should have grown old telling it, though he did not seem to age. He spoke with a different voice each time, as if one knight after another were speaking through him. His words wove a vast tapestry, filled with shapes and colors and bright faces, among which, quite insignificant, was the Knight of the Crutch, whose adventures were not entirely what was to be expected from a *geste* of chivalry, being too strange, too much a riddle. When bards worked it all up into poetry, they left that part out.

And what of Hormisdas? I have it from his own lips that he cannot die, that he and the Wandering Jew swap stories to while away the centuries, but each still has his pain, and so the quest is not quite complete.

I think that Hormisdas will be there on the Last Day, telling stories to the resurrected souls as they await Judgment, to distract them for a little while, to give comfort.

This is true. I have it from his own lips.

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BY ERIC BAKER

TSR goes straight to Hell while Interplay reinvents the virtual sword.

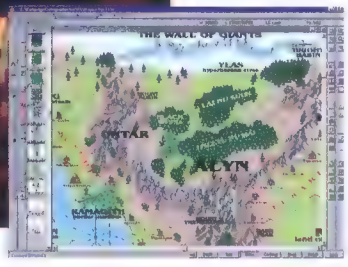
THE NEW MAPPING PROGRAM FROM PROFANTASY SOFTWARE IS THE BEST EVER CREATED FOR the role-playing and gaming market. *Campaign Cartographer 2* is a Win 95 program that lets you create professional-looking maps of any gaming environment, from wilderness terrain to city streets, from dungeons to starships, from alien planets to Mordor. CC2 (ProFantasy Software Ltd., London, England, 1998. CD-ROM, $75.95) has so many utilities and features that it feels like a mainstream program such as *Photoshop*. By the time you have finished the Tutorial, you will be able to create gorgeous, multiuse maps in full color, and yet CC2 is so rich a program that every time you use it, you will find some new way to exploit its features.

There are a wide variety of ways in CC2 to put information on a map. It offers several tools for drawing lines and shapes, and fill commands to blanket an area with a color or texture. The heart of CC2 drawing, however, is the symbol catalog. The program comes with a library of five hundred symbols; more are available for download on the company's Web page and you can import your own. Creating your maps is as simple as clicking on the symbol you want and clicking on the map to place it where it needs to be. Cities, trees, houses, doors, furniture, landmarks, and more can all be placed in this manner, in color or black and white.

The maps created in CC2 can make use of layers and can incorporate hotspots, links to other files. The advantage of using layers is that when it comes time to print out maps for the players to see, you can choose which layers to print. Thus if the characters manage to download the floorplan of the corporate office they are breaking into, you can print out the layers with the walls, while reserving the layers with the furniture and the guards. Individual items on a map can be set to be nonprinting or invisible, but usually it is easier to do this sort of thing with layers. Hotspots let you use the map as an organizer for your campaign; you click on a spot to see the records you have for it. If the characters are riding up to Avalon, double click on it to see what sort of encounters you've planted there.

ProFantasy is a customer-oriented company. The designers themselves answer technical-support questions. The updates, plus the new icons and templates that are posted to the Web site, come as a result of customer suggestions and requests. The company also runs an E-mail list that has created a community of support for people who use the program.

Like any powerful tool, CC2 has a cost. Making beautiful, professional-looking maps takes time. CC2 is not a program for making maps on the fly while running a game. Lined paper and a pencil remain a much faster way to get the basic layout across to your players. On the other hand, if you have the time and you want to create handouts that will blow your players away, then CC2 is the tool you need.



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***The Ways of the Clans: Book Five: The Way of the Scorpion. A Supplement for the* Legend of the Five Rings** *RPG. By John Wick. Alderac Entertainment Group, Ontario, CA, 1998, 120 pages, $14.95.*

For those of you who haven't encountered it yet, *Legend of the Five Rings* is a game of medieval Japanese role-playing set in the mythic realm of Rokugan, in the same way that *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* is medieval European role-playing set in a variety of fictional lands. Some of the background is straight from the history books, and some of it is not. The biggest made-up part is the division of the peoples of Rokugan into clans, each with

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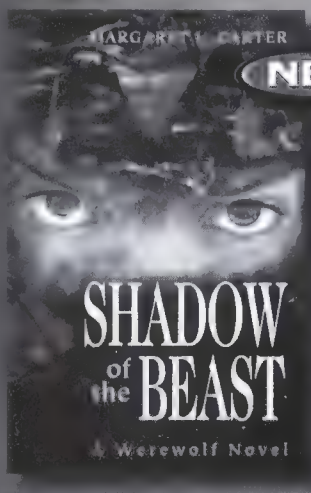

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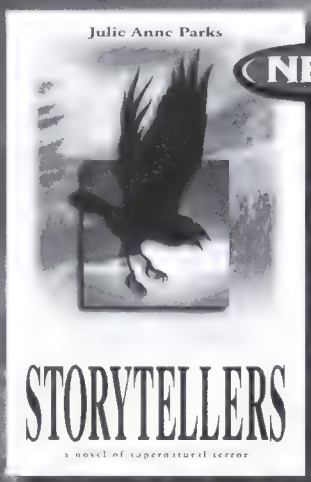

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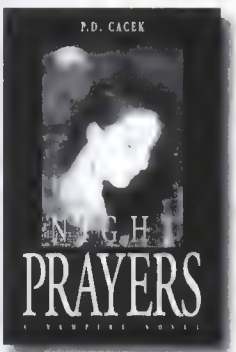

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their own traits, skills, spells, professions, secrets, histories, ancestors, techniques, heroes, villains, and geography. The simple basics of playing a character from each clan are laid out in the basic *LotFR* rule book, but to really get to know each clan you have to buy its supplement.

You don't have to read too many *LotFR* books before you realize that someone in Ontario, California really likes the Scorpion Clan. That person is probably John Wick, who helped design the basic *LotFR* game and who wrote *The Way of the Scorpion*, the latest of the clan supplements. All of the Ways books have been good, but this one is superlative. The author's enthusiasm for the subject shines through page after page.

Who are the Scorpions? One fact tells you most of what you need to know. Every member of the clan puts on a mask when they become an adult. The clan's most sacred duty to the emperor is to keep hidden the 12 scrolls whose written spells were used to defeat Fu Leng, the fallen god of the Rokugan pantheon, a thousand years ago. The Scorpions have built on that charge and make secrecy a way of life. They serve as the emperor's spies and they serve themselves with the information they find.

The hardest role to take in the actual playing of *LotFR* is to run a Scorpion character. There are hatreds and rivalries among all the clans, but there are also friendships and alliances. The Scorpion character doesn't get the benefit of any of the latter pair. It is like playing a Flambeau in *Ars Magica* or a chaotic evil thief in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*: No one trusts you. To play a Scorpion well, and to get your due from the other players' characters, you need this supplement. On top of everything else, there is a 10-page section in the back of the book devoted purely to advice on how to play a Scorpion and have fun doing it. This section is the best part of the book.

The second best part is for the GM's eyes only, so I can only talk about it in general terms. One of the threads through all the

ABOVE, LEFT, RIGHT: Are the ninja real? Determine the truth by testing your role-playing mettle in The Way of the Scorpion, *a supplement for the* Legend of the Five Rings.

LotFR books to date has been, "Are Ninja real, and if they are, what do they do and who do they do it for?" No definite answer is ever given, and the basic rule book specifically forbids player character ninja. As of *The Way of the Scorpion*, that ban is lifted, although player character ninja are still discouraged. *WotS* also tells the fullest story of who the ninja are and who they serve, but still does not tell everything. And it is entertaining. And it is funny. The ninja rules and background are one of those gems of rule writing that show up all too infrequently.

The rest of the book does not suffer by comparison to the ninja and playing a Scorpion sections. It is all interesting and much of it is entertaining. It could have used an index, and I would have liked there to have been an adventure tacked on. The book is riddled with story hooks, but no actual scenarios for adventures, much less a full-fledged module. In a game line like *LotFR*, which is not overburdened with published modules, I like to see any chance to put one in print used.

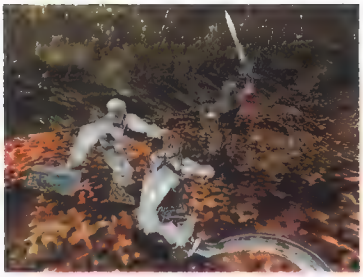
If you are a *LotFR* player who wants to play a Scorpion character, you have to buy this book. If you are a GM running a campaign that contains Scorpion characters or NPCs, you have to buy this book. If you've never played *LotFR* but you're interested in ninja from having seen them in movies and anime, well, you don't have to buy the book, but at least pick it up and read that ninja section. If you like it as much as I did, then buy the book. Excellence deserves its reward.

Die by the Sword. *Produced by Alan Pavlish for Treyarch, published by Interplay/ Tantrum, Irvine, CA, 1998. Windows CD-ROM $39.95.*

Two issues ago it was *Might and Magic: The Mandate of Heaven*. Last issue it was *Get Medieval!* And now we complete the Trilogy of dungeon crawlers with *Die by the Sword*, a first person 3-D "hack and slash" game from Interplay/Tantrum. The story line of *DbtS* is pretty basic. You play a hero. Monsters take your beloved and drag her off to a dungeon. You get out your great whopping sword and your trusty shield, and you descend into the dungeon to get her back. Along the way you encounter a host of baddies: kobalds, orcs, skeletons, minotaurs, dragons, giant tentacles, etc. Your job is to win past them all.

It sounds simple, but there is a catch. The catch is called *VSIM* and it is the name of the engine the game uses to resolve combat. What makes *VSIM* different from all the other first-person 3-D game engines on the market is that it considers each object in the game world not just for placement, but also for weight and speed. What that means is that a sword blow that starts way back and has lots of time to pick up speed hits harder than does a blow that immediately encounters another sword. In other words, not only are you better off learning to parry in *DbtS*, but there are good parries and bad parries just as there are good blows and bad blows.

Why is this level of detail a catch? Because you have to learn to use it. *Doom, Tomb Raider, Get Medieval!* all had in common that it took



ABOVE: If you choose to live by the sword, you may Die By the Sword. *Regardless, Interplay's* VSIM *engine reteaches players how to use the sword.*

about 30 seconds to learn their controls. It took a little time (a level or two) to get the hang of using them, but almost from the word go you at least knew where to put your fingers. In *DbtS*, it is easily the end of the first level before you are completely sure where your fingers go, and you haven't begun to get the hang of using the buttons. There is an arcade mode that cuts way back on the amount of practice you need, but it also cuts way down on the effectiveness of your sword. Not so much on its ability to deal death (although it does lower that too), but on its ability to save you from the blows of others.

After all these years of 2-D side-view fighting games, I really think that *DbtS* has a good idea. There is a place in the market for a fighting game where you are behind a 3-D figure so that the controls actually match the motions just as they do in a 3-D shooter. There are nine character types you can face in four different arenas if you want to take a break from crawling through the dungeon. LAN and Internet play let four people fight each other in the arenas, although you have to do the dungeon alone. It would all be perfect if it wasn't for how hard you have to train to use your sword to its maximum potential. And if there were more women characters.

Back in the dungeon, the crawl itself is a hoot. Most of the puzzles actually have to do with the game world, and usually there are different outcomes depending upon how you solve them. For instance, there is the orc gang at the dock. You can rush forward and try to kill them all, which opens one path to further adventure if you succeed. Or you can wait until they are distracted, sneak forward, hide in the box, and let the orcs carry you down the river, which puts you on a different path. Much better integrated with the story than so many of the "pull the levers in the right sequence" puzzles that make it into adventure games.

Two things mar the dungeon experience. First, the walls and doors are solid to the characters, but not to their weapons. If an enemy is hiding behind a rock, you can cut through it and him. Similarly, even in the tightest of tunnels, our hero swings his sword with gay abandon. The second point is similar; the monsters are transparent to each other. When the band of orcs surrounds you, they can flail away without worry of hitting each other, even though their blades are passing through their fellows' heads as if they were ghosts. Given how hard you had to work to learn to use the sword, it makes

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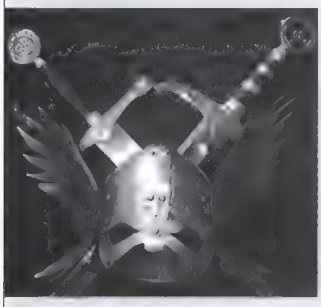

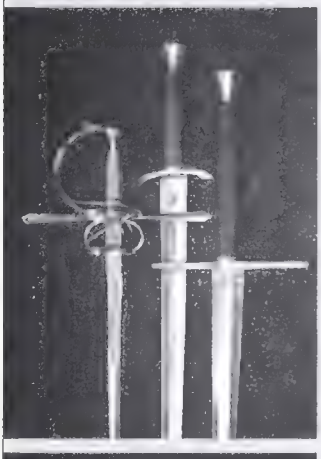

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you mad that the monsters get off so easy.

A good-looking game in a niche of the gaming world that needs to be better explored, *DbtS* is an inventive romp worked in a background right out of central casting. The arena combat is fun too. The game is simply hurt by the fact that it is so hard to learn to exploit it to its full potential.

A Paladin in Hell: An Advanced Dungeons & Dragons® Adventure. *By Monte Cook. TSR, Inc., Renton, WA, 1998, 64 pages, $13.95.*

Back in the days when high-level adventures were called "Monte Halls," TSR issued the first hardcover Player's Handbook. In it was a line drawing of a paladin, all alone, battling a horde of demons in a hellish landscape. Monte Cook says in his Introduction that that picture always stuck with him. He had long wanted to tell the story of that lone paladin and his fight in hell. And now Monte has.

A Paladin in Hell is a high-level adventure. Characters below 10th level need not apply, and those 10th and over need to make sure they stock up at the magic item cabinet before they leave on this quest. It is quite a quest. A legendary paladin has finally died. At his funeral, a prince of Hell shows up and sucks the whole church, congregation and all, down to Hell. One of the paladin's old friends, a powerful wizard, offers to send the characters after the church, if they can get to the wizard.

If you've ever started as a first-level character and been life and death with a kobald; if you've ever fought three rooms of giant rats and been grateful for the hundred gold pieces under the chamber pot in the last room; if you've ever clutched your wand of magic missiles for a whole adventure, afraid to use it because it took you three adventures to find and you don't know if you'll ever see another, then you will love this adventure. Being able to toss aside +3 broadswords because you're already using a +5 battle ax and +3 weapons won't hurt the demons you're fighting anyway, is a feeling of power and peril that is tremendously unique and satisfying. It is great to finally get to play with all those high-level toys that you read about in the supplements but never actually get your hands on. And you get to fight all those high level monsters that you always had to run from or (worse) outwit before.

Not that the monsters are any easier to kill just because you have all the good toys. Much of the module takes place on a demon ship with a demon crew that sails the rings of Hell. The inside is much larger than the outside, and contains its own canal. And a lot of traps. Not only is this module a trip back to the days of "Monte Hall," it also harkens back to the days when dungeons didn't have to make real-world sense, they just had to be dangerous and inventive. The demon ship is both.

As a one shot or for a campaign where your characters are already very high level, give *A Paladin in Hell* a look. See if your players are up to the challenge.

LETTERS

Continued from page 8

... were several pages of the story inadvertently left out? If not, then my conclusion is that I simply lack the intellectual capacity to understand the fiction you publish. I find that my personal evaluation of your magazine is irrefutably correct: The overwhelming preponderance of the fiction that you publish is, in a word: Dreadful! In any case, this is the reason I have chosen not to renew my subscription.

Harold R. Moore
Poulsbo, WA

Madam McCarthy,

Since beginning to read *Realms* in April of 1998, I have had some amount of concern with the quality of the stories published. Not that I haven't liked all of the stories in a single issue, that's not the problem at all. Most of the fiction is good, but it doesn't seem like fantasy. Some stories even have me feeling it was a waste of time to read, as I'm more entertained by the departmental portions of *Realms*. Part of this concern, I assume, is that I consider myself a traditionalist. I have always preferred the medieval/renaissance/pre-industrial setting in any literature, as with "Greed" (Aug. '98) and "The Secret in the Chest" (Oct. '98). Usually there is only one of that type per issue, and quite understandably, considering other tastes in literature. Please, though, seriously suggest to the execs at Sovereign Media that they might wish to create a separate horror magazine; some of the stuff in *Realms* is certainly along those lines.

May the Muses be kind,
George Cole
Grass Valley, CA

Realms *publishes a wide and eclectic variety of fantasy fiction. For the most part, our readers are encouraging, supportive, and excited by what they read herein. A few, as highlighted by the three letters above, are not especially happy with the literature in our pages, a few suggesting it is too lofty for their intellects, a few requesting more traditional tales, and a few unfathomable individuals who write complaining about the content of the magazine in the same letter they ask that I read and comment upon their work and/or send them author's guidelines...(????) The "Letters" column is a forum for information, opinion, dissent, debate and, of course, "praise." We take all our readers quite seriously, with the exception of those who we like to call PSBs. (See letter above from Mark Harkins for reference.) They bore us. We personnally feel that all they like to do is whine.*

Your comments are welcome. Send them to: Letters to the Editor, Realms of Fantasy, *P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Or better yet, E-mail to: shawnam896@aol.com*

New Poetry Contest $48,000.00 in Prizes

The International Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

The International Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like ***The Coming of Dawn,*** *pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world*

Owings Mills, Maryland – The International Library of Poetry has just announced that $48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The International Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

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Or enter online at **www.poetry.com**

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The International Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

"Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after source-book for poetic talent," added Mr. Ely.

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BOOKS

Continued from page 18

galaxy—comes across the Hokas, a species of small, furry beings strongly resembling Earth's teddy bears, the League finds its attempts to expose the creatures to our culture received with confusing enthusiasm and total lack of discretion.

Employing considerable ingenuity and complete abandon the Hokas heave their chubby selves entirely into becoming cowboys, pirates, and short, fuzzy versions of Sherlock Holmes. Sometimes they get it more or less right but their boundless creativity can be counted upon to carry all concepts into excess and push every error much further than humanly possible.

If you dimly remember the Hokas you have probably already stopped reading this review and are already frantically tracking down this complete collection of their doings. If not I suggest you put this magazine down at once, dress properly for whatever may be your outside environment if you are not already so attired, and track this book down as quickly as possible.

Hopefully my persuasive powers have succeeded. In any case I certainly am not going to keep on writing for the entertainment of any reader who has proven her/or himself too foolishly stubborn to follow my excellent advice.

Goodbye.

—Gahan Wilson

***The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, by C.S. Lewis; HarperTrophy, NY; 208 pp.; trade paperback, $5.95*

Most people read *The Chronicles of Narnia*, of which *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is the first book, as children. Children delight in the talking animals and easily relate to the heroes and villains of their own age. Yet if you haven't read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* since childhood, you have missed an incredible novel. When I teach Literature of the Fantastic to my college students and they read this book, they can hardly believe it's the same book they read as children. For this is much more than the story of funny animals and clever children. Below the surface runs a subtext involving forgiveness, redemption, and the power of goodness.

Lucy, the youngest of the four siblings, is the first to find the passage to the magical land of Narnia through an old wardrobe. She befriends a faun, Mr. Tumnus, and learns from him that Narnia is ruled by the evil White Witch. Eventually Mr. Tumnus, moved by Lucy's offer of trust and friendship, confesses that he is in the employ of the White Witch and has been planning to kidnap Lucy, since the witch has ordered him to abduct any humans found in Narnia. Tumnus helps Lucy to return to her own world, and Lucy forgives him his evil plans.

The next child to discover Narnia is the selfish, insecure Edmund, the second youngest. He meets the White Witch, who promises to make him a prince of Narnia, above his siblings, if Edmund will bring his brother and sisters into the magical land. He agrees. Becoming prince will prove at last to his siblings that he is best. He also reveals that Tumnus has helped his sister Lucy.

When all four children are in Narnia, they discover that Tumnus has been taken prisoner by the witch, and Lucy convinces the others they must help him. While Edmund pretends to go along, he later abandons his siblings and goes to the witch. The witch sends her wolves after the other children. As Edmund spends time with the witch, he comes to see the extent of her evil and cruelty, and he begins, for the first time, to feel "sorry for someone besides himself." This turning point eventually leads Edmund to acknowledge the wrong he has done.

Meanwhile, Lucy and her siblings meet Aslan, the Great Lion and true ruler of Narnia. They immediately recognize his goodness and strength. The arrival of the children triggers a war for the land, and Aslan must make a horrible sacrifice to save Edmund's life, a life that has become forfeit through his treachery. Lewis tells the story in a friendly, grandfatherly tone that carries the joy of pure storytelling. Yet his clear, clean prose carries moral and spiritual echoes. While some of my students conclude that the book is an allegorical retelling of the death and rebirth of Jesus, the book is much more. It is the embodiment of the ideas and ideals Lewis felt most central to Christianity, morality, and spirituality. How can one know good from evil? When should one be forgiven? How can one find redemption?

These questions, so central in politics these days, find their simple and uncompromising answers here. These deeper meanings, however, do not distract from the delight the story carries. In fact, they add to our enjoyment of the story, making the reading experience a richer, more rewarding one. If you haven't read this classic since childhood, rediscover it and enjoy a book that not only entertains but enlightens.

—Jeanne Cavelos

MYTH LIVES

Continued from page 67

tographs, tricksters and clowns, angels and devas… blending Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, and Native symbols with Jungian archetypes. Mark sees his art as a celebratory act, expressing one painter's appreciation of the wonder and mystery of life; it is also, he says, a conversation with people from countless centuries past who told these same stories, saw these same visions, walked this same earth before us.

In 1986 Mark moved from northern New Mexico to northern California, where he now lives in the Bay Area with his wife (writer Laurie Wagner) and their two children. He earned a Masters Degree from John F. Kennedy University, and now divides his time between teaching, making music, and making art: designing for films and CD-ROM, illustrating books and magazines, and exhibiting his beautiful canvases in galleries and museums. To walk through Mark's crowded studio is to enter a vibrant, mystical world where trickster figures dance at the edges of sight, whisper when your back is turned, and beckon you into landscapes that seem as real as the earth below. Mark is gifted with technical proficiency ("He can draw anything," one reviewer comments.), and a dazzling singularity of vision. He is also prolific, a quality greatly envied by other painter friends (myself among them)—his studio and his slide file are packed almost beyond belief with imagery that fills you with wonder, or sorrow, or makes you laugh out loud… and each one is a story, a tale that you know in your bones, a tale that your ancestors knew. Stories told without words, told with color and line. And, of course, with Spirit.

The painter is no less a trickster than the figures moving through his canvases. I've shared my favorite story about Mark once before (in the Folkroots column on trickster myths, *Realms of Fantasy*, June 1997 issue), but I'll share it again here because it encapsulates this iconoclastic artist so well: Mark often fills his car with paint when he heads out on road trips through the desert (usually in search of rocks to climb)—for he likes to stop on empty stretches of remote Western highways to paint eagles, wolves, spirit dancers, and other creatures right onto the black asphalt. These images will soon deteriorate under passing traffic and the hot desert sun. And yet for a brief while a bit of anonymous beauty glows on an isolated roadway—a mystery is left behind, and the world is a magical place.

Joseph Campbell believed that artists must be the shamans of our modern age. Mark might not claim that name for himself—but his art, like his life, is pure magic.

For a virtual glimpse into Mark's studio, check out his website: Hearts and Bones Studio. ❧

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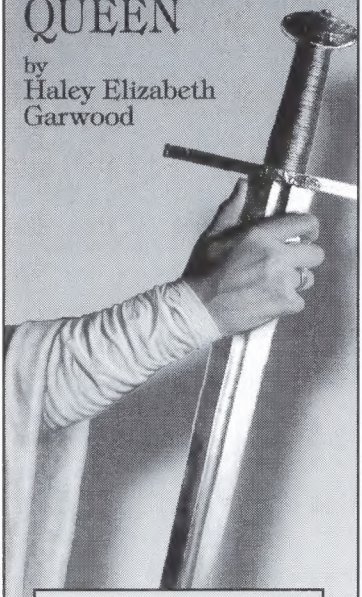

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Contributors

DARREL SCHWEITZER IS THE author of about 250 published stories, most of them fantasy. His credits include *Twilight Zone, Night Cry, Amazing, Interzone* and various Mike Ashley Aurthurian anthologies (*Chronicles of the Holy Grail*, etc.), *The Year's Best Horror Stories, The Year's Best Fantasy*, etc. Three collections of his stories have appeared, "Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out," "We Are All Legends," and "Transients" along with three novels, *The White Isle, The Shattered Goddess*, and *The Mask of the Sorcerer*. He is co-editor of *Weird Tales* and in that capacity has snared a World Fantasy Award with George Scithers (1992). He has also been nominated for the WFA for best collection and best novella. In the recent Marvin Kaye anthology *Don't Open This Book!* there is a fantasy story of his which dates from 1971. This either makes Darrell an August Senior Figure in the field, or just a bit long in the tooth…

DERRYL MURPHY is a member of SWFA, and has twice been nominated for Canada's Aurora Award. His most recent publications include "Canadaland" and "Frail Orbits" in *On Spec*, "What Goes Around" in both *Tesseracts 6* and in *Time Machines*, an anthology from Carrol & Graf, and "Cold Ground" in a Canadian anthology called *Arrowdreams*. Ellen Datlow is giving "Cold Ground" an Honorable Mention in this years *Best F&H*. Much of "Northwest Passage" is based on fact. Derryl's grandfather was a trapper up North during the '30s, and he was paid his share of a slab of bacon to take care of things.

KEN GRANING teaches Traditional Illustration at The Center for Creative Studies in Detroit. Once in denial regarding the use of electronic media in the field of art, he is now working with his computer to create some amazing artwork. He is able to create paintings on-screen using a pressure sensitive digital pen on a tablet connected to the keyboard. Ken can also scan original paintings onto his computer screen and from there, alter images, delete, edit, and include various elements. Ken's advertising and editorial work has appeared in numerous magazines, books, newspapers, posters, brochures and record album covers.

DAVID BISCHOFF's most recent book is *Quoth the Crow*, a dark fantasy from HarperPrism. He is presently working on writing segments of the Dynomix/Sierra CD-ROM "Star Siege." David appears regularly in two music journals, *Progression* and *Expose*.

PATRICK ARRASMITH is living in Brooklyn and attended the California College of Arts and Crafts in San Francisco. He generally does editorial illustration and this is his second piece for *Realms of Fantasy*. Patrick has

William Eakin

Alan Pollack

worked for *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*. His artwork as appeared in the *Society of Illustrators Annual*, as well as *Step by Step* and *The Village Voice*.

PATRICK WEEKES recently graduated from Stanford University with a degree in English, and is continuing on in the Master's program. Because of that, he has thus far managed to avoid getting a real job. At any given time he can be found studying Shakespeare, Plato (the subject of his next attempted novel), Kenpo Karate, the Cheyenne language, or the perfect recipe for chocolate chip cookies. He now owes favors to everyone who did nice things for him and said, "Pay me back when you sell your first story."

ALAN POLLACK is a self-taught artist with roots in new Jersey. Alan has worked for TSR in Wisconsin as a freelance illustrator, where he was greatly inspired by such artists as Jeff Easly and Brom. Past clients for his paperback cover art have been Berkley Publishing Group, Random House, and HarperCollins. he cites major influences on his artwork to be the Hildebrands, Frank Frazetta, and Michael Whelan. Alan is attentive to the artists he admires and has had the privilege of working with, and he trusts that his artwork is a reflection of this ongoing learning process.

WILLIAM EAKIN feels that "A Dragon of Conspiracy" might be the most moving of his Redgunk stories, with its "problems of heightened sentience." Bill also mentions that he was gratified to see Gardner Dozois writing that *Realms* was hardly rivaled for "sophistication and excellence." Starting as they do in the commonplace and vulgarity of Redgunk, Mississippi, but working their way to something else, he hopes his Redgunk stories will live up to that.

JOEL NAPRSTECK teaches painting at The Joe Kubert School of Graphic Art. He has worked as a freelance illustrator for a number of years. His artwork has been published in *Science Fiction Age*, and he has recently completed two covers for DC Comics, *Batman*, and *Superman*. Joel has been concentrating on "Pulp Art"; art with the lurid air and "hard-boiled" detail of a '30s pulp fiction jacket.

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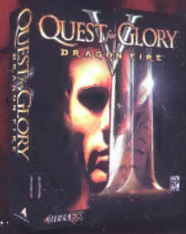

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